Isaac Asimov SILICON LIFE AFTER ALL

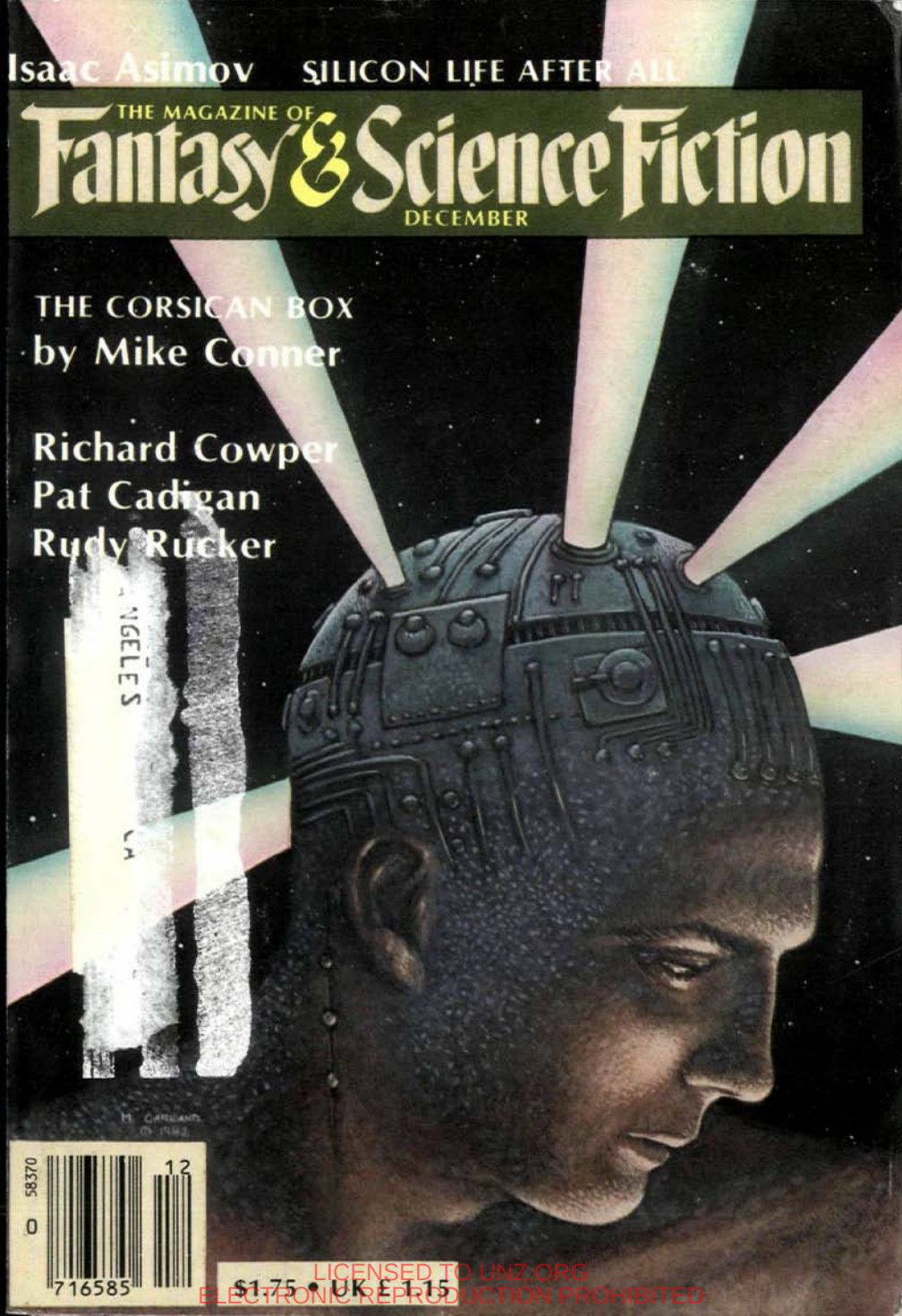
THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

DECEMBER

THE CORSICAN BOX
by Mike Conner

Richard Cowper
Pat Cadigan
Rudy Rucker



0 58370 12
716585

$1.75 • UK £1.15

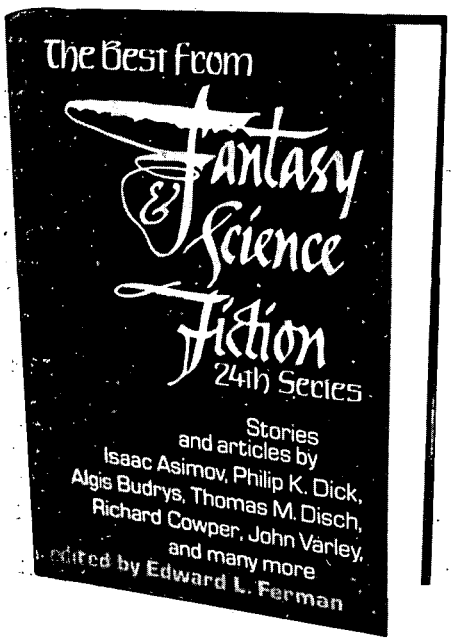
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Together, these volumes comprise a comprehensive postwar library of superior SF and fantasy."

—Neil Barron, *Anatomy of Wonder, A Critical Guide to Science Fiction*

"A new volume in this long-continuing series is always welcome. In the last decade, *Fantasy & Science Fiction* has offered the best combination of innovative writing and high standards of any of the major SF magazines."

—*The Booklist*, American Library Association


The Best From
Fantasy & Science Fiction
24th Series
Stories and articles by Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, Algis Budrys, Thomas M. Disch, Richard Cowper, John Varley, and many more
Edited by Edward L. Ferman

TWELVE exceptional stories from 1979-1981, including "Window," by Bob Leman, "The Fire When It Comes," by Parke Godwin, "Spidersong," by Susan Petrey, "The Brave Little Toaster," by Thomas M. Disch, plus others by John Varley, Neal Barrett, Michael Shea, Eric Norden, Richard Cowper, Philip K. Dick and Lisa Tuttle. Also: articles by Isaac Asimov, Algis Budrys and Baird Searles.

THE BEST FROM FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION
24th Series **Edited by Edward L. Ferman**

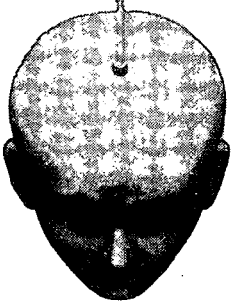
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS / A MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION BOOK

100 copies only of this hardcover edition have been signed by the editor — $14.95 includes postage and handling

MERCURY PRESS, Inc., PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mindkiller



A NOVEL OF THE NEAR FUTURE BY
Spider Robinson

Spider Robinson, a Hugo and Nebula award winner, has crafted a novel of such immediacy and high-drama that it demands to be placed squarely in the tradition of *The Andromeda Strain* and *Lucifer's Hammer*. *Mindkiller* tells of a near-future society where men and women are lost in ecstasy, as their brains undergo a process called "wireheading", the continual stimulation of the pleasure centers of the brain. It is a novel that pulls us into the darkest realities of thought control and manipulation of the human mind.

"This is top-notch entertainment, full of action, suspense, humor and lots of surprises." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Spider Robinson gives you a raw, gritty closeup of what really goes on in the bright, computerized world of tomorrow. This is a good one!" —*Robert Sheckley*

Holt, Rinehart & Winston **$14.50** At Your Bookseller

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER • 34th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

CONDEMNED, A KISS, AND SLEEP	7	Wayne Wightman
THE CORSICAN BOX	54	Mike Conner
WHAT DID THE DEAZIES DO?	96	Richard Cowper

SHORT STORIES

PROMISES	32	Lewis Shiner
THE MAN WHO ATE HIMSELF	35	Rudy Rucker
COMING BACK	75	Damien Broderick
THE DAY THE MARTELS GOT THE CABLE	120	Pat Cadigan
THE WAY DOWN THE HILL	139	Tim Powers

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	46	John Clute
FILMS: Kevin in Computerland	93	Baird Searles
SCIENCE: Silicon Life After All	128	Isaac Asimov
INDEX TO VOLUME 63	162	

CARTOONS: ED ARNO (74), JOSEPH FARRIS (92)

COVER BY MICHAEL GARLAND FOR "CONDEMNED, A KISS, AND SLEEP"

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Editor & Publisher — ISAAC ASIMOV, Science Columnist

DALE FARRELL, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Business Manager

Assistant Editors: ANNE JORDAN, BECKY WILLIAMS

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 63, No. 6, Whole No. 379; Dec. 1982. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $17.50; $19.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 20%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

Copyright © 1982 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Wonderful adventure, great characters—a masterpiece by a super-writer from the 'Golden Age!'"

—A.E. van Vogt

"Discover an old master...Hubbard has written a science fiction novel, epic in size and scope and as much fun as anything he ever wrote in the 30s and 40s. This has everything: suspense, pathos, war, humor, diplomacy and intergalactic finance. Hubbard keeps things moving irresistibly...the 800 pages go by so quickly...**If you like Heinlein, you'll like Hubbard.**"—*Publishers Weekly*

The time is the year 3000, when mankind has been exploited and enslaved for a thousand years by the alien race of the Psychlos. A lone young man decides to break away from the small band of human survivors in the Rockies to challenge the power of the Psychlos, setting the scene for a thrilling tale of interplanetary war and financial intrigue, monster races, thrilling underground heroics, and much, much more.

"A huge (800 + pages) slugfest. Hubbard celebrates fifty years as a pro writer with **tight plotting, furious action, and have-at-'em entertainment.**"
—*Kirkus Reviews*

BATTLEFIELD EARTH

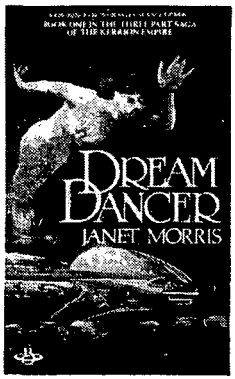
A saga of the year 3000

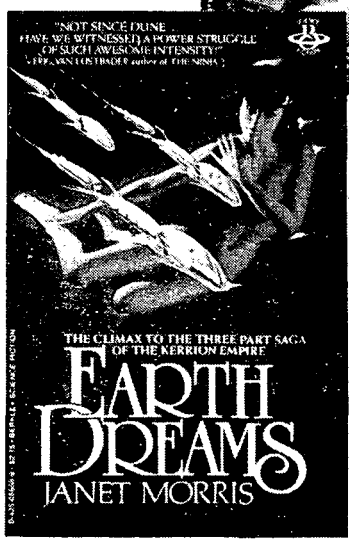
L. Ron Hubbard

$24.00
Available at bookstores or direct from
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
175 Fifth Avenue, New York 10010 Attn: JW

Also available: deluxe edition limited to 250 signed and numbered copies. Slip-cased. $125.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED




"NOT SINCE DUNE HAVE WE WITNESSED A POWER STRUGGLE OF SUCH AWESOME INTENSITY!"
—ERIC VAN LUSTBADER, author of THE NINJA
THE CLIMAX TO THE THREE PART SAGA OF THE KERRION EMPIRE
EARTH DREAMS
JANET MORRIS

COMPLETE AT LAST: JANET MORRIS' EPIC SAGA OF THE KERRION CONSORTIUM

Here is the story of Shebat, the beautiful headstrong girl from a primitive planet called Earth, who became the pivotal figure of an empire. And now, for all of you who hate to begin a trilogy today and wait years for the end of the story, all three volumes are now available in paperback from Berkley.

"A fascinating and lyrical story, told with great invention."
—Peter Straub, author of GHOST STORY and SHADOWLAND

"Not since DUNE have we witnessed a power struggle of such awesome intensity!"
—Eric Van Lustbader, author of THE NINJA

"A book of power and beauty."
—Science Fiction Review

All three books—$2.75 each

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This story — about the adventures of Rodan Samsara on the pleasure planet of Thearis — is a blend of strong writing and marvelous invention. It is from a new writer who has been published in Amazing. *Mr. Wightman writes that he is 35 years old, teaches creative writing at the Modesto (CA) Junior College, and "spends a lot of time listening to Haydn while I'm in the kitchen teaching myself how to cook. I also run about 20 miles a week so I can enjoy eating what I cook."*

Condemned, A Kiss, and Sleep

BY WAYNE WIGHTMAN

My name's Rodan Samsara and I travel with the Delphic Oracle. It's a business arrangement, although she is very good to look at, and sometimes when she touches me, the touch is more than skin-deep. Nonetheless, it is business only with us. She is a soul-catcher and her first allegiance is to the 40,000 or so whispering souls waiting inside her to be reborn. She has no time for me. On the outside, she is a wiry, sexy tomboy with thick, black-rope hair, and when she walks, she moves more ways than one.

How we met is another story, but suffice it to say that she kept me from being turned into 170 pounds of high-grade extra-lean rat kibble for the long-nosed concubines of some slime king on a dumpworld where I had the misfortune of stopping over for a few days' rest. And now we travel together. We assist each other. But when she touches me, it sometimes feels like she is moving the tip of her tongue across my heart. I have not told her this.

Now, this time, I wanted a little rest, a little relaxation. Was I being excessive in my desires? Was I demanding too much of the universe? I just wanted a few days without pressure, so what did I do? I arranged to see Corandra Kinellen, the only woman living whom I had told that I loved. Corandra was an even two meters tall; she had solid cat-like muscles and a mind like a box of razor blades. Her idea of love-making would have appalled anyone but a clinician and would have amazed gymnasts — and her skin smelled of gardenias, always of gardenias.

I should have known better.

I had met her a dozen years earlier, and everytime I had seen her, some pu-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trid disaster had rolled out of the woodwork — *but*, I figured, what were the odds of that happening four times straight? God damn it, I should have known. How many times will I have to learn that in this universe you give thanks when nothing goes wrong — and if you're having a good time, that's when you should start looking behind you. Screw around, and you find your gonads up drying on some muscle-head's meatrack.

"High quality illusions that *you* direct! The only perceptible difference between *our* illusions and *your* reality is time: you can spend two weeks and your life's savings trying to have a good time somewhere else, but on Thearis we use an ultra-high-speed generator that allows you to squeeze two weeks' fun and games, two weeks' high living or two weeks' low-down gut-level *fun* into an *hour!* And the price is something to write home about. Thearis — a resort world for those with unusual and discriminating tastes."

That was the same advertisement I'd been picking up for two weeks. The seventh or eighth time I'd heard it, I got in touch with Corandra Kinellen and arranged to meet her there. Del said she could use a rest too — carrying thousands of people within her was a burden she did not discuss, but it showed in her eyes. She drank a lot.

Del and I were coming in on Thearis, the resort world, and I was sitting with my chin resting on my folded hands wondering what kind of meeting Corandra and I would have. It had been five years since we'd seen each other. Del came up from the back part of the ship and stood at the counter and mixed herself some gin and lemon.

"I have a reading on our vacation," she said. "Want to hear it?"

I didn't want to hear it, but when the oracle offers, you take. I nodded.

" 'There will be a change of mind.' " She shrugged and turned back to the bar. "Doesn't sound too ominous," she said. Del only reported what came to her — she didn't know any more than I did about what her prophecies meant.

Guidance chirped and threw an image of the Thearis jump station on the screen. It grew larger as we approached. Behind it was Thearis itself. The only land mass was a thin circular rim that looked like it could have been the remains of an ancient impact crater. The center of it was filled with water, and dead in the middle of it, like a bull's-eye, was another dot of land. The rest was water — smooth, gray water.

"What do you plan to do down there?" I asked.

She came up behind me and looked at the screen. She rested her hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to try to feel like a human being again. I'd like to forget for a few minutes all the people I carry around. I'd like to forget the voice that tells me things I don't under-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stand." The ice in her glass clinked as she poured the entire drink down her throat. "I'd give anything to be stupid." She went back to the bar and I saw her fingers touch the combination of buttons that would give her more gin and lemon.

The ship nuzzled against the jump station and then clanked into the lock.

"Someday," I said, "maybe you can be free of all that."

Her narrow shoulders shrugged. She looked back and gave me that cocked-head look of hers that's the closest thing to a smile I ever see on her face. "And maybe gin is good for me," she said. She slugged down the second drink and dropped the glass in the recycler. "Let's get on with it," she said, brushing her hands against her thighs. I took a deep breath.

How you do, folks! My name is Earl and I'm going to be your host here on Thearis." Earl at least looked human. "Thearis is the greatest pleasure center in this sector of the known universe! Step right this way. Right down this corridor. Just follow me." Earl looked like he would be more at home selling small appliances to defectives. He wore a stagger-stripe suit, the kind that changes with every movement and causes you to wonder if you're suffering from a drug overload. His face was red, and slick-skinned and from his nearly lipless mouth boiled a continuous stream of words: "...straight ahead is what we call 'the lagoon,' although it's actually a small inland sea. Get your money ready please — twenty creds each. The only land area on this planet is this right here, that's in the shape of a skinny donut, with the lagoon is the middle, which is where the Techs live, the people, if you want call 'em that, who lived here before we came and made this place what it is."

"Why is the central island orange-colored?" I asked.

"We serve all species," Earl said, sticking his hands in his baggy pockets and making his suit jitter even more. "This part of the island is for humans, and up the trail a ways we take care of the Shrifar, the Vargoonians, you name it." He stopped suddenly and with a flourish indicated a small inset in the corridor. "Just deposit twenty creds each right here." He smiled pleasantly, his eyes nearly disappearing. Between his short teeth showed a narrow, deeply grooved tongue.

"Why is the central island orange, Earl?" I asked. I looked directly into his eyes, but there was nothing there.

"Orange?" The question seemed to freeze him, as though he had never been asked it before. Suddenly he sprang to life. "Beats the hell out of me. I just work here, meet folks at the jump station, take their money. I don't get paid to think!" he said happily.

Del looked at me curiously.

"Twenty creds each. Just feed it into that slot there," Earl said. His suit wavered wildly each time he rocked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back and forth on his feet.

I took the money from my pocket.

"Why is it so cheap?" Del asked.

"I am not allowed to discuss the economic operations of Thearis, miss," Earl said good-naturedly. "But I guarantee if you don't like what you get, I'll see to it you get your bucks back."

I put the money into the intake. The machine thanked me.

"A friend is supposed to meet me here," I said. "She—"

Earl walked away from us, motioning us to follow. "Our illusions are of the highest quality, tailored to fit any species. We got no prejudices here, although personally I could do without some of the trashlife that comes down here and expects us to virtually hand over an actual herd of sex objects for them to mess around with and then kill or eat or whatever the hell they want to do. But I digress—"

"Earl could you hold it just a minute?"

He stopped in his tracks and turned around very fast, his face open, blank, his lips slightly parted. "You have some special request? Something a little on the unusual side? Say no more. Something a shade on the violent side? Say no more." His tongue flicked at his bottom lip and he grinned.

Del was standing very erect beside me, watching Earl carefully.

"A friend of mine is supposed to meet me here. Her name is Corandra Kinellen."

Earl stared blankly at me several seconds. He did not seem to be able to think and move at the same time. Suddenly he raised one hand over his head. "A tall one? About this high? Copper kind of skin? Gets mean and shows her muscles if you mess with her?"

"That sounds like her." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Del had her hands in her hip pockets and was doing her cocked-head mona-lisa smile.

"Right down this way and around the corner," Earl said, "and all your questions and desires will be satisfied." He was silent for a few steps. "Your friend, Coranna Kinanna or whatever, she kind of injured one of the Techs this afternoon. The management will be happy if you can get her occupied. The Techs, see, they're a bunch of cold-blooded sonsabitches, if you want the truth, and this one was asking her some questions about her body and I guess he tried to touch her."

"How bad was it?" I asked. Del was still doing her smile.

"Well, she busted his arm and then she held his hand right up to his own ear and then she crushed his hand — I guess she wanted him to hear it. You gonna mess with her?"

"As much as I can," I said.

"Well, she's right up here. Now, what we got here, on this island, is a real nice situation. About twenty years ago, the first generation of my people landed here just to look around and see what kind of place it was, and they met

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the natives, the Techs, and they called 'em that because they were real good with machinery. Not real talkative, but good with their hands. Now my forebearers handed over a bunch of equipment, old junk stuff, and lo and behold, they thought miracles had happened. The whole goddamned island filled up with what you're going to see right down that hallway right *there.*"

He had timed it perfectly. We went around the last corner and saw something that looked like a centimeter-wide strip of silver tape across the corridor floor; it was mirror-like but seemed to reflect nothing — but *best*, best of all, on the other side of it stood Corandra Kinellen, two meters of her, dressed in lavender fur, her hair a violent configuration of shifting arabesques. My bones vibrated, and when she turned her eyes on me, I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. I wanted her. I was smothering in desire. Testosterone poured into my blood.

Like the vaguest voice of some fading ghost, I heard Earl saying from somewhere behind me, "Just walk across that shiny thing. Just step right across it and you'll see what Thearis is all about."

Corandra had her arms out, reaching toward me. I glanced back at Del — she had her hands in her back pockets and was looking at the mirror-line. Del glanced up at me and with her eyes told me to go on, to go ahead. A part of me didn't want to leave her; she looked very small.

Just one pace in front of me, Corandra was reaching for me, coming toward me. Like a lavender cobra, she fixed me with her eyes, stepped across the mirror line at the same moment I crossed it and swung around her, my arms wrapping around her hard body and my hands feeling the smooth sheaths of muscle that enclosed her powerful body. Something flew up out of the mirrored strip — something blue and round — but it was only light — globes of blue light. Then something unusual happened.

In all my years drifting in lightless space and admiring the rising and dying flares of tortured stars, the stately entropy of galaxies that relax their hold on order, and the quiet intricacies of dark, uninhabitable worlds where small things creep and live with night — in all that time, I never guessed, never dreamed, how my irrational blood yearned for the green living things of Old Earth, for the black rich soil on which my ancient kin had built and lost their dreams a thousand times and more. But there I was. In a place I had only heard about, I was home. *I was home.* And I was sitting in the shade of a wide, spreading tree with leaves like the palms of hands, looking into the round blue eyes of Corandra Kinellen, who now, like a figure out of history, sat straight-backed, her legs folded lady-like beneath her, dressed in white lace. The smell of gardenias filled the air around her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For a moment, the smallest instant, I was distracted by the rush and flutter of a flock of black birds that rose from the rolling meadow near us. They were birds of Old Earth — I had never seen anything like them before.

"What has taken us so long?" she asked. Her lips barely moved when she spoke, and her eyelids lowered slightly. Corandra's gaze barely concealed the sexual violence that was visibly rising in her. Her dress of white lace was beginning to fade, revealing her brown skin and browner nipples beneath. She stared at me.

"I was...." I looked behind me, expecting to see Earl or Del or some part of the building in which we had been standing. There was nothing but pastures and rows of bushy poplars. "Where are we? What is this place?"

"Part of us is back in the corridor — where I was waiting for you." She moved closer. The smell of gardenias was stronger and I could feel her warm breath on my lips. "I've been waiting for you longer than I can remember."

I had forgotten the details of her face, her mongol eyes, the way her black hair glowed like spun filaments of black pearl. I had forgotten the speck of pale skin on the back of her left thumb — *my* skin that she had had grafted there.

"As always," she breathed, "I carry you with me."

I moved my hand up her arm, over the smooth arches of muscle, to her neck. Her blood pulsed under my fingers. In every part of my body I could feel the speeding beat of my heart.

"Stand up," she said. "See what happens."

I got to my feet, nearly lost my balance, and then realized why: somehow, in this land of illusions, when we stood up, we grew taller, and we stood shoulders above the tree we had just been sitting under; we were titans, we were giants in this place, and it was all ours.

She turned and ran a few strides away from me. The ground trembled with her steps. She grinned at me and then sprinted away. I followed her across fields and plains, and we ran knee-deep in wide, swift rivers; and miles away, over the tops of scattered forests, we could see range after range of fading mountains in one direction — and in the other lay the humped back of the ocean, lying smooth and blue, not more than a few miles away. We ran and ran, and when we ran, the earth thundered.

I caught her in the white dunes. The hot sand poured rivers of energy into us until we were no longer like human beings but were wind and sea and fire restrained only by the sheerest lacery of flesh. We were giants and we were power and we were greater than our world.

She lay beneath me, her hair spread in intricate curls, half-buried in the powdery sand. Her hands pulled at my shoulders at the back of my neck, and I said, "I didn't know how much I was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meant to be here, how much I needed you."

She just said, "Yes."

The breeze off the water dried our sweat, and we lay on our backs and watched a single seagull pass one direction and then the other over the hissing surf. I asked her if she had been here before.

"Yes, while I was waiting for you."

"How much of this illusion is of our own making? How much does Thearis provide?"

"Morley told me that Thearis provides the whole thing. We have no input." Her hand touched my thigh. "We just enjoy."

"Who is Morley?"

"A fellow who speaks bad English and says he is my host."

"I should have guessed. The man who met us was named Earl."

Corandra breathed deeply and turned on her side. She took a handful of sand and held it over my chest and let it slowly drain between her fingers. "Morley told me that on the center island the Techs set up some devices that they use to project the illusions. But the one Tech I talked to didn't seem bright enough to do anything more complicated than feed himself."

I turned on my side and faced her, resting my cheek on her wrist.

"Why is this place so cheap?" she asked. "It makes me suspicious."

I placed my hand between her breasts and felt her heart beating in strong slow pulses. "I heard you broke the Tech's arm."

She grinned. "He stood and stared at me, which I ignored, and then he started asking me what percentage of me was fat, how fast I could dissipate lactic acid, if I had any implants, and then he started to touch me."

I grinned. Corandra Kinellen did not like to be touched by strangers.

"I told him not to, but he thought he could do it anyway. He tried to grab a handful of loose skin on the side of my waist. Not only was that implicitly insulting, but he touched me after I told him not to. So I broke his arm and then pinned him and held his hand up by his ear where he could hear what it sounded like to have his fingers broken." Corandra turned onto her stomach. The sun gleamed in two lines down her back on each side of her spine. "The Tech didn't care. He really didn't seem to mind. But he didn't touch me again. Morley was coming down the corridor, and he didn't care either. The Tech got up and strolled away, unconcerned."

Far away, a gull called and the surf rhythmically answered in a drawling hush. Gardenias filled the air.

"What do the Techs look like?" I asked.

"Humanoid. Grayish-pale skin. Primarily they are unclean. They walk around with dirt on them. Why are you grinning?"

"Your phobia about dirt. I've seen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you deal with chaos like it was an old friend, but dirt makes you wild." I was almost laughing. "The Tech was lucky you didn't remove his offending parts."

She looked at me coolly, regally. "He was relatively clean. Dirt is for growing things and walking on, not for cosmetic purposes." She blinked slowly and her eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly. "And, now, I'm going to eat you alive, I'm going to make you remember me the rest of your life." She rose up on her arms and moved over me, pressing her mouth to mine. Her tongue was hot and against my lips her teeth were smooth and cool and dangerous and lovely and lovely and lovely....

We swam and we floated in the sea as great speckled shapes moved in the depths below us. The bright clear sun was still high in the sky.

"Even in dreams," Corandra said, "I never imagined a place like this." She made a splashing turn and flipped her long, smooth legs over her head and dived beneath me.

When she came up I said to her, "I can't believe this is illusion — I just saw you do that, you did it. Are we both going to have the same memories when we go back?"

She swam over to me, her eyes large and dark like a cat's eyes when it sees prey. I took her by the waist as her legs wrapped around me. "The Solipsistic Inevitability has you in its grips," she said, grinning. Even wet, she smelled of gardenias. Her hands moved over my shoulders, down my arms to my wrists; and in the moment her lips touched mine, I realized she had immobilized me. "Admit it," she said, moving herself against me. "Admit that I'm just a collection of appealing sensations." Beneath the surface of the water, her skin was hot against mine. "Admit that I'm just another way you have of looking at yourself and that's why you love me." She touched me slowly.

"I can't think straight when you do that — I'll admit anything."

She released me, and like mammals of the sea, we dived, made love, surfaced to breathe, and then dived again, over and over, without thinking, without care, without thought, with joy.

I dropped to the corridor floor like a bag of dirt. By an immense force of will, I opened my eyes and saw Earl's low-top shoes a meter away. On the other side of him, Corandra was slowly getting to her feet. She looked as beaten and exhausted as I felt. Raising myself up, I saw Del lying near me on her back. Her eyes were open and dazed and blank.

"See what I tell you?" Earl was saying. "See what I *mean*? Thearis is one hell of a place! And you get all this for only twenty creds each. Be sure to tell your friends and cohorts." He reached down to help Corandra up but then jerked away his hand as though he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were bitten by a painful thought. "Ma'am? I'll give you a hand up, if you want me to, if you promise not to break my arm."

Corandra waved him away and slowly lifted her hands off the floor and stood.

Earl briskly pulled me up by the wrist. "Look where you like, you won't find no other places like Thearis. We got ubiquitous scenery, we got unendless delights, we got whatever you want. This place is ace-primo." He pulled Del up. She wavered on her feet and slowly gathered her senses. "Now I imagine," Earl continued, "that you people are tired as runnin' midgets. So if you'll follow me, I'll take you to your cabins where you can repose and get some rest before you do this again." He waved us to follow him. It was not easy.

We left the entry building and came out on a stretch of sandy dirt where tall scrawny palms cast small pools of shade. Fifty meters in front of us, two neat rows of white cabins stood in the sun, and beyond them lay the huge lagoon with the one dark, orange island in its center.

I moved next to Del as we trudged behind Earl, and in a shaky rasp I asked her what had happened when she stepped across the reflective tape.

"I could never tell you," she said in a voice as tired as any I'd ever heard from her. "All my people ... thousands of them, they were all there. They were separate from me. They had faces, and they talked and laughed. In the mountains, beside a lake, they all sat and told stories and had picnics — and for the first time, I was free. I was like anyone else. I was simple."

Great as the effort was, I turned my head to see her face — but she did not resemble the Del I had known before: she was all exhaustion and sadness — the beauty of what she had seen had filled her with grief. I wanted to put my arm around her, to touch her, but Earl was pulling her away.

"Right this way, miss." He opened the cabin door for her. "Just let me help you up that step, and there you are." Del disappeared in darkness, and Earl pulled the door closed. His face was starting to glaze with sweat. "And the both of you, you have this cabin here, two doors down." He unlatched it and I pulled Corandra up after me. There was only a cot and a water dispenser inside; the bare ugliness of the room did not offend us; we needed only rest.

Corandra fell onto the cot and rolled to the side nearer the wall. I lay beside her and felt all sensibility drain out of me. The noise of Earl slamming the door echoed far, far away.

"Tomorrow," Corandra murmured. "Tomorrow ... there will be more ... and more...."

I remember the smell of gardenias, the faint pink of her lips, and then there was nothing.

The faint pink of morning crept under the door, but when I reached

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

across the darkness to touch Corandra, my hand touched only bedding.

"Corandra?" I nearly fell out of bed — it was narrower than I remembered. "Corandra? Are you here?" I pushed the door open and let in enough light to see that I was alone — and to see that the cot was too small for both of us to have slept in.

The door pulled open. "Good morning, sir! Good morning!" It sounded like someone who sounded like Earl and could have been his brother, but this person had such a smearing of scaly freckles across his nose and cheeks that he looked like the survivor of some disease that should have killed him. "Hope you slept good, sir," he said, grinning and grinning. "My name's Cleetis and I'm your host today."

"Where's the woman who was with me, Corandra Kinellen?"

He looked around and behind him, as though she could have been standing within touching distance. "Where's *what?*"

"The woman I was with. Last night we slept in this cabin. When I woke up, she was gone."

He gave me a sly look and a shrug. "Your affairs is your affairs," he said. "Maybe you said something in your sleep she didn't like. Maybe she just went for a walk." He stuck his hands in his pockets and jingled something metallic.

A door closed behind me, half a dozen cabins away. It was Del. She stood on the step, blinking into the morning sun.

"Look whata a nice day we got here," Cleetis was saying, turning his face to the sky. "Sun shining, nice quiet surf, hundreds of illusions you can walk through. This woman you're interested in, just step through one of the illusions, and she'll be there."

"Sometime during the night I was moved from one cabin to another. Why was that done?"

"Moved?" He looked surprised. "You mean like *bodily* moved? Well." He pulled one speckled bony hand from a pocket and massaged his chin. "We don't normally move people unless they ask us to."

He was stalling and we both knew it. I ran down to the cabin Corandra and I had been taken to the previous evening and looked in. Empty. The bed was made up.

Cleetis strolled casually over to me, his hands once again in his pockets.

"Where's Earl?" I demanded.

"I don't know any Earl. I just came on duty an hour ago."

"What's the matter?" Del asked fuzzily. The pink morning sun made her hair look blacker than usual.

"Corandra has disappeared." I faced Cleetis and stood very close to him. "This conversation has gone on too long," I said. "Tell me either where Corandra Kinellen is or where Earl is."

"I don't know either one of those people!" Cleetis said helplessly.

"He's lying," Del said, as though

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stating the tediously obvious. She sounded sullen, withdrawn.

"I didn't *do* anything!" Cleetis whined. Sweat began rolling out of his hair.

"Tell me something I want to hear, Cleetis, or I'm going to damage you a little bit."

Half a second later Cleetis was running toward the lagoon, toward a small cluster of palms that grew around a pile of boulders. He ran splay-footed and knocked-kneed, but desperation made him run fast. Sand kicked up in sprays behind him. I still ached from the day before, and my muscles seemed to be filled with some kind of slow viscid fluid that made me feel kilos heavier. Just before he got to the boulders, I was close enough to see the dirt on his white collar. He looked back once, his eyes bloodshot and wide with fear—

And I should have see it. I was slow. I wasn't watching.

The man dodged, and as I swerved around him, I saw my foot touch down on a shining, mirror-like strip that stretched across the ground between the two palms. Effervescent blue boiled up from the ground and enveloped me.

I stood in a garden amidst curving rows of yellow and pink tea roses. Other than the buzzing of a few bees, it was utterly silent. The boundaries of the garden were lined with huge, shaggy eucalyptus trees whose dropping limbs blocked all view of the surrounding countryside. Behind me a white wicker gazebo sat in a small grassy clearing. Two wicker chairs waited silently beside a white table, and a steaming pot of tea was in the precise center of it. It was all vaguely familiar. Something about it jiggled an old memory of something ... somewhere.... And something was not right about the garden. It was lovely, peaceful, beautiful, and vaguely wrong.

I figured that if this illusion were like the previous one, I would be stuck in it an hour or more, subjective time, and when I came out of it, I could expect Cleetis to either be vanishing in the distance or standing over me with a club. I could also expect to be exhausted. All I wanted was a little rest. What had I got? A peculiar rose garden. I had lost Corandra Kinellen, and Del had looked depressed.

I sat down at the wicker table under the gazebo and tried to concentrate on what was wrong with the garden.

The teapot was white china, decorated with a green vine that grew up from its base and circled the lid. All the leaves on the vine were different. I had seen one like it before — when I first met Corandra, back on 9J-0321. We had sat in the Sub-governor's garden one afternoon and drank cherry-root tea.

I lifted the lid and breathed. Cherry-root tea.

Then I knew what the other thing was — it was the roses. I was sitting in the middle of a rose garden, every bush

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in full bloom; I was surrounded by eucaplytus trees — and all I could smell was gardenias. *Gardenias.*

The significance was more complicated than putting two and two together, but not much more. Thearis provided the landscape for its guests, and this landscape was coming from Corandra Kinellen. How or why, I didn't know — but I did know that Corandra was on the wrong end of this thing, she was gone, and I had been lied to about her disappearance. I also knew that I wanted to get my hands on Cleetis and make a physical statement of my displeasure.

I sat under the gazebo and waited until the tea was cold. I waited. I seethed.

It was like falling backward out of a chair. The scraggly palms lazily waved their fronds in the morning sky, and I could feel the damp sand under my hands and shoulders. And again, waves of exhaustion spread through me. Not ten seconds had passed because Del was still in front of the cabins, just starting to run toward me, and Cleetis was thirty or forty meters away shouting, "Tech! Tech!" and waving his arms wildly in the air. He ran like a wad of laundry.

When I tried to pick myself up, my hands trembled and my legs felt like they hadn't walked in months.

Del walked around the silvery tape and helped me to my feet. "This is not a good place," she said sullenly. "As you fell across that thing, the voice told me." Her voice was low and dull.

"Your voice is very perceptive," I said, trying to stay above my legs.

By now, Cleetis had disappeared around a sand dune.

"It looks like we're in it again," she said, looking past me at the lagoon.

My legs were wobbling, but they could carry me. "All I really wanted to do was get some rest," I said.

"And to see Corandra Kinellen." Her voice was flat and emotionless, and I was beginning to fear the reason for it.

I nodded in the direction of Cleetis' trail. "Let's go."

We didn't have to look very far. After trailing him along the inner beach for five minutes, we heard running behind us — a Tech. It was the first one I had seen and it fitted Corandra's description perfectly: his skin was gray and smudged with dirt, and raggy hair grew out of the back of his head. He wore only a dirty brown shirt that reached halfway between his hips and his knees. When he saw us waiting, he stopped running and began a sort of mindless shuffling slog through the sand. There was something distinctly ineffectual and nonthreatening about him. His feet seemed heavy and his head swung side-to-side and he panted open-mouthed. He was one of those creatures whose ignorance precedes them like an odor.

"I want to know where my friend is," I said to him before he got up to us.

"You are looking for the tall female

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

who injured Tech yesterday," he said crisply in a snapping little high-pitched voice. Inside the sloppy, tired-looking body, his slick pink tongue worked like a machine.

"Where is she?"

"She's gone," the Tech chittered. He was close to us now. His eyes were small and dark and hard-looking. "She left last night. She is not here anymore."

"Lying," Del said flatly behind me.

I didn't see what the Tech did until he had done it, and the whole time his gray rat-face looked straight at me and smiled.

I was tired when I came to Thearis. I was more than tired after two trips through their illusions. I was exhausted, and I was slow. Without it registering on my slow brain, the Tech's hand came from behind him and he threw something at my feet that looked like a wadded ball of blue foil. When it touched me, I saw a streak of silver at my feet and then I was enveloped in blue. They had me again.

I stood in a world of ice. I was not cold, but the world was a cliff-sided valley, and it was all crystallized and frozen tight — waterfalls that poured from the crags were frozen rigid. Every living thing there were held in icy suspension, waiting only for a warm breeze to thaw it out so it all could die.

I stood on a sheet of ice and wondered, Why *this?* Why an illusion of a frozen world? There was an awesome grandeur about it, but it was not my idea of beauty. Somehow, Corandra had designed the illusion of the rose garden and gazebo to let me know that somewhere, somehow, she was nearby. But *this?*

I tried to see something in the immense walls of ice other than crevices, shatter-marks and shades of darker and lighter ice. Only in one place — and then I couldn't be sure — a great hump of ice loomed in the middle of the valley floor; it was shaped, in a peculiar way, like some kind of insect, a great humpbacked, many-legged insect. Around its base, several rows of trees stood like pawns, and in front of those, frozen, frost-covered trees lay across the plain as though they had been dropped from a careless hand. I saw it all, but it meant nothing to me. All the time, behind my eyes, the words were repeating, "They have Corandra. They have Corandra. They have Corandra." The illusion I stood in was all ice and death, and I could do nothing but wait for and dread the return to Thearis and think, over and over, "They have Corandra." And at the last moment, the instant before the world of ice flicked away, I smelled it. I smelled gardenias.

My cheek hit the closure on the Tech's flimsy shoes. Above me I could hear him making a kind of *snick-snick* sound. The Tech was laughing. And all I wanted was to rest, to sleep. I didn't care if he laughed. I wouldn't have cared if he walked on me, shot me, or left me for the waves to pull into the la-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

goon — my arms ... legs ... all heavy, filled with sand ... I wanted to sleep.

The Tech moved his foot, and the small buckles scraped across my face and raked away strips of skin. Then the sole was shoving at my shoulder. When the sun shot across my dazed line of sight. I realized he was turning me over, face-up. And he was still laughing. At my feet I saw Del, her arms hanging limp at her sides, her face blank and observant.

I forced my eyes upward, and from under his loose shirt, the Tech was taking a small, flat handweapon. He looked down at me, his eyes like black plastic bearings. He pointed the silvered tip of the weapon at the bridge of my nose, and still making that sharp clicking noise in the back of his throat, he fired.

A chisel between my eyes being pounded into the back of my brain would have been less painful. Whatever he shot me with, it attacked the nerves, overloaded them, set up echo patterns, until everything blazed in a chaos of red and black, blackening to purple, fading to nothing.

He killed me and it was the best thing that could have happened.

Del caught me at the instant of death and I floated nowhere. Around me, like softly breathing sleepers, I could sense the others, the thousands of others she harbored.

I knew either she would push my consciousness into the Tech where I would have to power it out with him, or he would be too fast for her and do to her what he had just done to the body I had lived in for the last four months.

Del was quick.

I caught a glimpse of Del through the Tech's eyes — she stood there gazing calmly into our face, apparently willing to accept whatever the outcome was.

In a second, the Tech's mind turned on me — it was massive; it was huge and complex and swelled up around me like an ocean of knives. I fought for a last glimpse of Del, because I knew she could not save me from this; I knew the Tech would kill her as soon as he subdued me; and knowing that I had not the dimmest chance, I fought screaming into the midst of the thing — and it evaporated. Like a fog bank, it simply dissipated, leaving me standing in the Tech's body holding the weapon and looking down at the steaming, blown-open body that I had lived in. Now it was no more than a congealed abomination.

Del stood unmoving, waiting to see either savagery or recognition in what was now my gray-skinned face.

"I'm back," I said.

Del nodded.

Something bleak and unspoken was growing up between us — but I consciously refused to deal with it then. "Something is wrong here," I said. "Between you and me."

She nodded again.

"But now I have to find Corandra."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I know you do."

"Will you help me?"

"I'll help you, as we agreed." Her voice was even and mechanical, without inflection.

"You'll be my prisoner," I said. "Maybe we can get somewhere with that." I pointed the weapon in her general direction and started to move along the tracks left in the beach sand by the Tech. She stood there, still staring at my face.

"I am afraid I will die here," she said. "My people will die with me."

"I understand. I'll do this alone. You get back to the ship."

Still, she did not move. She stood there, wiry, intense, her black-rope hair glistening in the sun. "I wasn't excusing myself," she said finally. "I wanted to tell you what I am afraid of. I'll go with you to save the woman if we can, but Rodann ... if I have to choose between you and the 40,000 people I carry, I'll let you go. I'll save my people first."

"I know that. I understand." I also understood that it wasn't just that she was afraid of dying on Thearis — she was expecting to die. Perhaps her voice had spoken to her. She wasn't telling me, if it had, and I certainly did not want to know.

"So let's go," she said, turning and walking along the trail left by the Tech.

During the walk I started feeling the strangeness of the mind I inhabited — there was almost no shape to it, no boundaries or residues that would make it a distinct mind. I felt like I was standing in the middle of a desert without sand, without elevation or depression. There was not the slightest trace of who or what the Tech might have been.

The tracks led us down the beach to another smaller row of cabins. One of the human hosts saw us and turned our way. It was neither Cleetis nor Earl, but he looked remarkably like them. To our right, half a dozen meters away, I saw another strip of silver between some rocks and a palm. Del saw it at the same moment.

"Let's push him through that a few times," I whispered.

She veered in the direction of the tree.

The man strolled toward us, whistling something pointless through his teeth. His pants were skin-tight, several inches above his ankles, and looked like he had made them himself. On the pocket of his shirt he had sewn the word *Leon* in a dozen stitches. He never looked at me. He stared at Del.

"Well, well, well," he said admiringly. "You got yourself another good-looking one, didn't you."

"Please, sir!" Del whined, appropriately desperate. "Help me! I don't know what he wants of me. Make him leave me alone!"

"Now, now," he said, patting her shoulder. "You just let me have a word with the rat-head here, and we'll see

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what we can work out." He turned to me. "Now look. I realize you Techs skim off a few tourists now and then and what you do with 'em is your own business, am I right? And it seems to me, if I am remembering what I seem to be remembering, that you guys got one of the human women yesterday. That tall one you brought through here. Right? Correct me if I'm wrong." He turned and winked heavily at Del. "Now we don't want any word to get out that people turn up missing when they come to Thearis. So what I suggest to you is that you turn this one over to me. She's more my type than yours anyway. I'll examinate her, find out if she's expected anywhere, and if she isn't...." He shrugged knowingly. He turned to wink at Del again, and I gave him a little kick at the back of his knees and then slugged him as hard as I could in the back of his neck. The thin bones in my hand snapped like twigs, but Leon stumbled right across the strip of tape that had been planted between the rocks and the palm.

I hadn't seen it happen to anyone before: as he fell, he turned, and I could see his eyes — as soon as his head passed over the band, his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell like a side of meat. When his head hit the sand on the other side of the strip, his eyelids blinked open. Del and I went around to the other side and pushed him through the field again. This time when he fell, he fell like a dead man.

We dragged him to the base of the palm and set him up. I slapped him twice with my broken hand before I realized that I was hurting myself more than I was hurting Leon. Del nudged me aside, positioning herself over his legs, and slugged him like a fighter. Leon rolled sideways and opened his eyes and groaned.

"Where is Corandra Kinellen, the tall woman you saw?" I asked him as Del pulled him upright by his shirt front. "Tell me where she is or we'll take all day to beat you to death."

He stared at me, as much as he was able, but he couldn't understand; he was, after all, staring into the blank face of a Tech.

"Tell me where the Techs took her," Del said. Coming from a human, Leon could understand the question. Still, he didn't answer. Del took the weapon from my hand and pressed it hard into his upper lip, right under his nose. "You don't have long to answer the question," she said.

"We didn't do anything to her!" Leon slurred, talking through his exhaustion. "We didn't touch her. I don't know anything about nothing — we just work here because they pay us in metals." Blood dribbled out of his mouth. Del pushed a little harder into his lip. "The Techs took her. Ask *him* what they do with 'em." He was looking at me now.

"Last time, Leon," Del said. "*Where?*" Blood ran around the silver point of the weapon and down the man's chin.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The island," he blurted. "In the middle of the lagoon." He kept looking back at me. "I *knew* you sonsabitches would try to take over sooner of later," he said venomously.

Del slapped him once quickly to regain his attention and then jammed the weapon's point against his lip. "Now, Leon, *why* did they take her? Why do they take tourists out to the island?"

"I don't *know*," he blubbered. He started crying. "Shit, *I* don't know, I just work here like all the other hosts. I don't know nothing about what they do with the people and things they snitch off and take out there. They let us use the illusions and —" He wiped one cheek with a gritty hand, leaving his face splotched with sand. "— and they pay us good. *I* don't know what goes on out there. *I* don't hurt anybody."

Del did not look impressed. I stood back, trying to ignore the pain in my shattered hand, and let her deal with him. She was doing well.

"Leon," Del said calmly, "tell me how they get the tourists out there?"

"I seen 'em swim off in that direction," he whined. He had got sand in his eye and was trying to wipe it clear.

"Keep your hand down," Del said.

"My eye —" He raised his hand again and Del slugged him again. I heard something pop. Leon fell over, his mouth half-buried in the sand, and he whimpered. "You hurt me," I heard him gurgle.

"I will kill you, if you don't answer me," she said evenly. "A human being can't swim that far — how do the Techs do it?"

Leon didn't want to answer.

Del looked at me. "I'm going to kill him now."

"Wait! They put 'em on this flat thing that floats," he said weakly, "and then three Techs hook themselfs up to it and they swim out there and when they come back the thing is empty. That's all I know."

"Where do they leave from?" Del asked.

He pointed further down the beach. "Over there. Down in those rocks they keep two or three of those flat things."

Del stepped quickly away from him, and I grabbed him by one arm and muscled him right over on his side and then pushed him so his head rested right in the middle of the silver illusion-strip. Leon tried to say something when he saw it coming at his face, but his eyes suddenly rolled back in his head, and the word caught in his throat like a piece of unchewed food.

Del handed the weapon back to me. "Heavy-duty interrogation," I said. "Where did you learn to do that?"

She turned and started walking toward the rocks where Leon had said the "flat things" were kept. After half a minute, she answered: "People are dying here. They are being used up and killed. The voice told me. It told me what to do to that man back there. It said that he'll have a hundred-year

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dream of ecstasy and will be dead ten minutes from now. It told me that what we're looking for is out there." She nodded her head toward the faintly orange island in the middle of the lagoon.

I had to ask: "Did it say if we would be coming back?"

She interlocked her fingers behind her head, prisoner style, and said nothing. Once again, we were prisoner and Tech, and once again, this Del was not the Del I had known before. She was sullen, withdrawn, and she did not seem to like me much anymore.

Ahead, in the rocks, I saw a gray face peek out at us. Then, very methodically, it and another Tech hauled out their weapons and began firing at us. I pushed Del aside and we both hit the sand simultaneously. But there was little danger. Their shots were missing us by three or four meters.

I sighted along my arm and seared a hole in the midsection of one of them and then swept across to the second one, sending jets of steam out of his shirt. They fell silently, and for a moment I heard only the water of the lagoon lapping at the wet sand and the sound of my own breathing.

"Up the beach," Del said quickly as she pointed.

A ragged formation of Techs slogged through the sand toward us, all of them armed and firing randomly. Everywhere the sand hissed and melted in globular clumps. One of the Techs tripped on his own feet and went down, tripping another one who continued firing as he fell, cutting in half the Tech who was running in front of him. A spot of sand the size of a handprint melted beside my shoulder, and I smelled the fabric of my shirt smoldering. They were getting closer and more accurate.

I did not like doing it, but one by one, the front ones first, I dropped them. A breeze blew the hot stink across the sand toward us.

"More coming," Del said.

Another dozen of them gathered at the top of the beach. Without any conference, but with some apparent plan, one of them moved out from the group and jogged sloppily at us, firing as he ran. Del and I bolted for the shelter of the rocks, twenty or thirty meters up the beach, and I picked up a second weapon and handed it to Del.

When the approaching Tech got close enough that his shots were becoming dangerous, I aimed — but I didn't fire. His little black eyes showed neither fear nor hatred, and like the others, his mouth was open, gasping for breath, and he was utterly at my mercy.

I glanced at Del. She knew what I was thinking.

"Do it," she said. "Now."

I squeezed the handgrip. The Tech's face seemed to blur and for an instant his legs seemed to run out from under him and he went down on his back. Up above us, another Tech separated himself from the group and ran

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at us — and again, the same thing happened.

"What the hell is this?" I said when the third one came, slogging and firing wildly at us. "Stop this!" I yelled at them. He came ahead anyway, his mouth open and working, and those little pointed teeth seemed to chew the air as he lurched forward, past the first burned body.

"*Do* it," Del said from behind me.

I quickly turned to her: "What are these things? Is there anything in them? Are you picking them up when the die?"

"There is nothing in them. When they die, I hear whispers I can't understand, and in a second, they fade to nothing. Kill them all — you're killing nothing."

The sea-damp rock next to me hissed and steamed as one of the random shots of the Tech came close. I turned and looked at him a second — and it was true: he ran like some anesthetized corporeality, unaware of where he was, of the ground under his feet, of what he was attacking or why. And the others stood further up the beach and emptily watched me kill them one by one. They came, and I stopped them, but I did not like it.

When only three remained, something happened. Simultaneously they dropped their weapons and walked unevenly toward us, again harmless-looking. Halfway to us, one of them chittered mechanically, "If you want to go to the island, we will take you there."

"What I want is the woman you took there, Corandra Kinellen," I said back, still ready to burn them. "If she is on the island, bring her to us."

"No," one of them said. They stood twenty meters away, all in a row, like mannequins.

"Bring her to me," I said in the most authoritarian voice I could manage with the Tech's tongue and teeth.

The Techs said nothing more. They came toward us again, veering to the far side of the cluster of rocks we had taken shelter in. One of them pulled out a white panel, about one-by-two meters, that had on one side a dozen oddly spaced straps and closures — oddly spaced until one imagined a human form lying on the thing: a person would be utterly immobilized when strapped to it.

Del watched them carefully, her eyes as cold and distrustful as I had seen them all day. "I'm not understanding these things," she said. "They must be telepathic — they knew you were not one of them right away, and they act in concert without any overt communication." She tilted her head forward a little, still watching the Techs as they swarmed over the panel, attaching lines to the front of the thing and slipping harnesses around their chests and shoulders. "They must be telepathic," she repeated, "But my voice tells me that they are empty, they know nothing about machines, nothing about people, about this world, or about anything else." She looked at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me. "If there is nothing in them, about what could they be telepathic?"

"You may come this way," one of the Techs said. He pointed at the panel. "You will sit here. We will pull you to the island." They were slipping off their cloth shoes: thier feet separated into long, webbed toes not far below the ankle. They waded into the lagoon until only their heads showed above the water and the panel was floating. "Sit in the middle, please," one of them said. "Hold to the straps."

Del slowly took in a deep breath. She stared emptily at the bobbing white panel and asked, "Do we go?"

"You don't have to. I can do this alone. Corandra is no one to you."

"She's important to you and you're someone to me. Let's go."

We waded out knee-deep and then gingerly climbed on the thing. In front of us, only the sleek gray heads of the three Techs were above water. Smoothly and evenly, their arms and legs started moving, and the panel jerked a little as the slack went out of the cables. They swam like rats, holding their chins out of the water and paddling swiftly, machinelike.

Within minutes we had moved nearly a kilometer from the shore, and the beach now was only a thin line of dirty yellow with a few scraggly palms here and there to break regularity of the horizon. From that small a distance, it looked bleak and lonely and desolate — how I or anyone else could have dreams of such beauty in a place like that was something I would have to understand later; I did not understand it then. Sitting beside Del, watching the orange central island grow larger and deeper in color, I realized how little I understood of anything.

And the mystery nearest me was Del. Finally I said, "Talk to me. Since we came here, you've been remote and haven't talked to me much ... or much seemed that you liked me anymore. Is it because of Corandra?"

She had been gazing at the nearing island, but all at once she turned and stared into my face. Her eyes were calm, unblinking, and cold. "Of course it isn't Corandra. Between you and me it's a business arrangement. We assist each other. Isn't that so?"

I nodded, but I didn't believe it any more than she did.

At the waterline was a scrambled chaos of wet black rocks that reached four or five meters up the shore. Beyond that, the island was made of closely fitted red-orange boulders. The huge colored rocks were all flat-faced and relatively smooth, and they all — I suddenly realized — had four sides: three sides were fairly straight and the fourth, the longest side, was a gently curving arc. They were all approximately the same size — and they were *not* rocks.

The three Techs slowed as they approached the rocky shore and slipped

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out of their harnesses and then waded ashore. Del and I followed watching for anything unusual. The island was a silent place, no birds, no lapping waves, no breeze whispering over the land. A quick look above us at the interlocked orange slabs confirmed that they were not stone, not a random convergence of natural forces — they evenly covered what we could see of the island like the shell of a turtle.

I pointed my weapon at one of the Techs that stood looking dully at the floating white panel and demanded, "Where is Corandra Kinellen?"

The Tech looked at me silently. In his glossy black eyes I could see myself, Del, and the island in dark reflections. It took him a moment to think; then he waved us to follow him up the island to the orange slabs. That was when I noticed the smell.

When we approached the slabs, they creaked and ground together, and then, slowly, they parted, opening up a passageway just wide enough for us to walk through single-file. As they shifted laterally, I could see their cream-colored underbellies and their many multi-jointed legs folded neatly beneath them. The things were crustaceans — something like crabs. And from underneath the things drifted a wet, fetid smell — an odor like the death-smell of small hot animals and like the rancid churnings of warm bacteria-ridden swamps.

Behind me, Del gasped for breath. "I'm all right," she said. "Keep going."

Ahead of us, there was always the constant growl of one shell heavily grinding against another, opening up a corridor for the five of us.

Beneath the shell was little room for anything else but the legs of the things, but several times we did see single Techs crouched among the pale-shelled legs. All of them were busily eating small wet pieces of something. They ignored us and often licked their hands and wrists. Twice we saw decomposed parts of Techs smashed beneath the crabs' legs or lodged between them. The air grew thicker with stink, and the most primitive part of me recognized it as a smell to flee from.

"We are here," the lead Tech suddenly announced. He stepped aside and I saw, all at once, the machinery of dreams, the source of its power, and Corandra Kinellen.

At the highest part of the island, at its center, there was an open area, surrounded by the segmented, nonhuman faces of the crabs. In the center of the clearing, surrounded by the unconscious, the dying and the near-dead, stood the neat arrangement of machinery the ancestors of Earl and Cleetis and Leon had given the Techs.

Corandra Kinellen lay face-up in the rocky dirt along with hundreds of others, both human and nonhuman. Her skin was blistered red and purple. Her eyes were closed, but I could not tell if her face was peaceful because her eyelids were no more than watery blisters and the skin on her cheeks and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forehead had puffed and cracked and slowly oozed a clear fluid. She would not live much longer lying there.

And extended from the hot shining equipment in the center was the receiving antenna: suspended on a light framework, the concentric circles of cable hovered only inches above their faces. As Corandra lay there dying, her dreams were somehow being picked up and beamed back to the tourists.... My hand sweated on the handgrip of my weapon.

I wanted to scream, "You have killed her!" I wanted to kill them all, to burn a steaming swath through them, all the way to the lagoon — but all I could do was stand there and look from Corandra to the empty, shelled faces of the crabs to the Techs. I wanted to curse them and have them die with curses in their ears.

But no one feared us. No one paid us any attention. A dozen Techs busily attended the bodies. They would make a small incision in the hand or foot to see if blood still flowed. If it did, they moved on. If it didn't, they dragged the corpse from beneath the low rings of the antenna and disappeared with it among the legs of the crabs. I saw one of the Techs stare at the distended abdomen of a dying dehydrating alien and stroke it gently.

One of the corpse-carriers abruptly dropped his hands, and the body he was helping to carry thumped heavily on the dirt and gravel. The Tech turned and plodded over to us. His gray, dead face showed no trace of intelligence and only the slightest hint of tiredness.

"Hello," he said rapidly. "You were interested in this one?" He pointed to Corandra. As I glanced at her, I saw a small, hard-shelled thing crawling on her arm.

Always watching the Tech, I took off my shirt and laid it on the antenna, shading Corandra's head and shoulders.

"You're killing her," I said, almost choking on the words. I *needed* to kill the thing in front of me. My hand started to draw the weapon upward.

"She isn't dead yet," it said.

"I want you to understand this," I said, consciously shaping each word in my dry mouth, wanting so badly to kill him and the rest of the Techs that at the moment only the words *death* and *murder* had any real meaning to me. "Understand that I do not expect to get out of here alive. I know that I am as close to death as she is." Corandra lay unmoving.

"Your expectation is justified," the Tech said in a quick burst of speech.

"You don't deserve to live."

"*Deserve* to live? Tell me how you came to believe that you understand what should and should not be allowed to live."

The Tech wanted to discuss why I believed he was evil — and all around me lay dying humans and aliens, their skin blistering off their bodies. Corandra stirred minutely, a clicking noise

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

coming from the back of her throat. Without a thought in my head, I burned the Tech, shearing his shoulders from his body.

He dropped in a heap. Instantly, two other Techs dragged him away. Another one approached and said, "Rational discussion offends you? It makes you want to kill me?"

"Kill *you?* You and the other one—"

The Tech did not grin, but his lips twisted peculiarly and his shiny black eyes became even more glossy. "There is only one native resident on this planet. Just one, and I am it."

My eyes focused beyond the Tech on the angularly segmented faces of the great crabs that surrounded the clearing. A heavy grinding rumble of their shells sliding against each other came from behind us — the passageway through which we had walked was closing up.

"One must not mistake an extension of the body, an extremity, for the body itself. What you call 'Techs' are my hands and fingers. The thinking part of me resides around you."

I looked around at the chitinous shells, the edges of their folded limbs, and high up at the edge of their bodies, the tight mandibles of their mouths. There was nothing that looked like eyes. "And there's only one of you," I murmured. The weapon in my hand felt as useless as a rock.

"Only one," the Tech answered, "spread through many parts. Are your aggressive inclinations learned or inborn?"

The thing was invulnerable if what it said was true — and it probably was. It explained a lot. If I tried, I could kill most of the Techs and three or four of the crabs — but then what? There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of the things crowding edge-to-edge over the island — and for all I knew there could be hundreds of thousands more scuttling across the silent floor of the ocean.

"I am a curious race," the Tech was saying. "I thought we were alone in the universe until humans came and gave us their worthless equipment. They told us there were other races, and I became interested. That is why Thearis is arranged as a place of pleasure and relaxation."

The weight of helplessness was settling on me. It didn't register at the time, but I saw Del pulling my shirt off the antenna, exposing Corandra's face. Then she stepped back a pace and looked at her.

"I have learned that most species are like humans in that they fear the universe. It is too complicated for them to understand. Out of helplessness, they eliminate those things they find offensive because, perhaps, they reason that those things 'do not deserve to live.' In truth, the universe terrifies you, and you repond by removing ambiguity where you find it — and what is conscious life if not an intricate configuration of meat, chaotic fears,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

obsessive desires, and demanding rationality? What could be more repulsive to your sensibilities?"

"The woman is dying," Del said from behind me.

The Tech folded his hands under his shirt. His eyes showed no more emotion than the plastic knobs on a piece of electronic equipment. "In the backs of your fearful minds," he said, "death is the mother of beauty, and here on Thearis we allow you to play in the beauty that grows in the dreams of the damned. When animals of your type know they are condemned," he said, gesturing at the human and alien bodies lying under the antenna, "they dream of beauty and hope, they dream that the universe is simple, small, harmless, and that they are where they *belong*. Final hopes are the finest."

The Tech's hands moved swiftly from beneath his shirt — the hypo-gun snorted and I felt the sting of the needle in my side and the cool seepage of the drug into my blood.

"You should have interesting dreams," the Tech said. "I will learn from your desires, and I will allow other humans to participate in those dreams — *such is the price of their* pleasure."

Already, the drug was causing his voice to sound like it was far away, echoing down a long hallway. I squeezed the handgrip of the weapon and swept its beam across the Tech and across the bellies of the huge crustaceans nearest me. The Tech's left arm and shoulders slid off his body, and where the heat hit the shelled things, I heard meat sizzling and steam puffed out of the burned gashes. I aimed the weapon at the central machinery — I wanted to end this, all of it — and fired. A red spot formed on one of the casings — it turned white and then the side caved in on itself amid a crackling of burning insulation.

Blackness started squeezing off my vision — I wanted to see Del — I wanted to tell her I was sorry before I dropped. But when I turned I saw her poised over Corandra, and, faster than I could think, she fired her own weapon point-blank into Corandra's face — her body jerked as though throwing off the last vestige of life.

"Del —"

She raised her weapon and pointed it at my face. "Stop," she said. "Just stop."

"But did you catch Corandra when she died?"

"Why should I?" she said coolly. "We're all dying here today." It was utterly silent after she said that. Then, still looking at the silver emission point of her weapon, I felt my arms drop. I could barely stand. "We're all dying alone here. We are all always alone — yesterday I realized I was even more alone than other people. And just this once, I want to indulge my desire to kill you, in payment for bringing me here. Goodbye."

Before the fire illuminated every pain I had ever known, there was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something worse by far — the one person I had trusted with my life abandoned me. Before the fire came despair, and I did not care that I died. I was released to an emptiness beyond blackness.

The planet had no life on it. I liked that: The sea was smooth and blue, and when the slow sun eased itself behind the barren mountains, the clouds turned lavender and pink. Beyond the beach where we lay, a continent of rubble, mountain-sized boulders, and flows of ridged magma spread thousands of kilometers to the next empty ocean. We were alone. We liked that.

Del roused herself from her nap and looked at me through sleepy eyes. "Did you sleep?" she asked huskily.

"I've been sitting here, glad to be sitting here. I've never watched you sleep before. You're pretty when you sleep." I put my hand in her black hair. "I don't know how I could ever have not trusted you."

She put her head in my lap. The sun in this place had darkened the freckles across her nose. "What else could I have done?" Her arms wrapped around my waist and she closed her eyes again.

Del had caught me and Corandra when she killed us and had then told the Thearisian that she appreciated its intellectual curiosity, that she knew a race of shape-changers it might be interested in examining. Whether or not it believed her she did not know — but it released her, it said, because the machine was broken. Del said that the thing seemed to be amused with what she said. "Consciousness is a cancer," it said, "and it is metastasizing across the universe."

It took her months to find a body for me to reside in — he was a patient in a hospital, an unrepentant suicide; Del had him released to her care, and, two hours later, I was taken from the murmuring darkness within her and could see again and smell and touch and taste her — that was the first thing I did: I kissed her, and I took my time doing it.

Over the ocean and beyond the barren mountains, the lavender sky was deepening to a dense, rich purple. Del opened her eyes. "Do you still love me, after watching me sleep? After everything else?"

"Even more," I said.

"After we leave here, we'll find someone to put Corandra into."

"I'm staying with you." I moved my hand across her forehead and into her hair. "I love you now, I'll love you then. With you, I am who I was meant to be."

She reached around my neck and pulled herself to my mouth and kissed me and kissed me, and I did not care that it was the beginning of night or that in this world we were utterly alone, because I loved her, was loved, and was happy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A short and sharp variation on a classic sf theme: first contact between an alien and a human, a young child...

Promises

BY

LEWIS SHINER

"Now look, Bobby," the alien said. "If you promise not to tell anybody about this, we can do a lot of neat stuff for you."

"You don't have to talk down to me," Bobby said. "I'm almost eight." Bobby tried hard to look right at the alien's eyes and not let him know how scared he was. The alien looked just like anybody else, except for a weird greenish glow around him, kind of like an oil slick. His *aura*, the alien called it.

"I'm sorry," the alien said. "But it's true. We can do a lot for you."

"Like what?"

"Clothes. Your own TV. Stuff like that. What do you want?"

Bobby shrugged. "I don't know. Not clothes." He shook his head at the alien's lime-green leisure suit. "What are you—" He started to say "people," but that wasn't right. He couldn't think of another word, so he just left a blank in the sentence. "—doing here, anyway?"

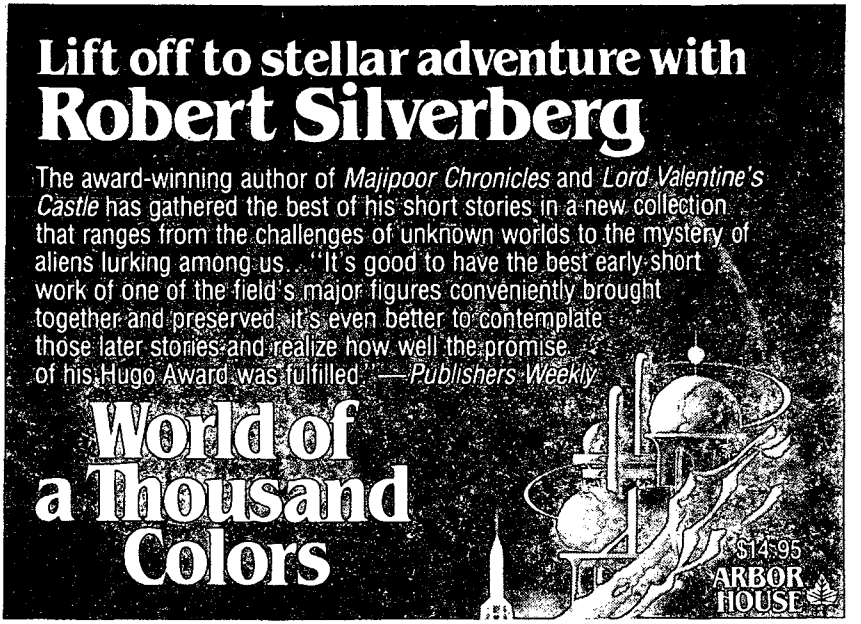
"Well," the alien said, "it's a long story." The alien crouched down to be at Bobby's level, which only made Bobby nervous. It was something grown-ups did when they were about to try to con you. "We had to come here. We don't have any place to live anymore. We hoped we could come here and live in peace and nobody would notice us."

Another alien came over and asked the first one, "What is the problem?"

Now Bobby was really getting scared. He would never have been out here in the park this close to sunset except that his parents were still on vacation, and he'd felt like walking after school. Then he'd seen the alien and followed him, and now here he was.

He had the feeling he was in big trouble.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


Lift off to stellar adventure with
Robert Silverberg
The award-winning author of Majipoor Chronicles and Lord Valentine's Castle has gathered the best of his short stories in a new collection that ranges from the challenges of unknown worlds to the mystery of aliens lurking among us. "It's good to have the best early short work of one of the field's major figures conveniently brought together and preserved. It's even better to contemplate those later stories and realize how well the promise of his Hugo Award was fulfilled." —Publishers Weekly
World of a Thousand Colors
$14.95
ARBOR HOUSE

"It's the kid," the first alien said. "You know that aura problem they warned us about?" He stuck his thumb out toward Bobby. "They weren't kidding."

"So what do we do? Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah, but it's no good. And if there's one like him, there could be a lot more. I don't know, Sam. I just don't like it. I think maybe we ought to pull up stakes and try somewhere else."

"You mean ... you'll leave us alone?" Bobby said. He thought he'd seen something like a wink pass between the two aliens, but he couldn't be sure.

"It may be the best thing, kid," the second alien said. "But you'd have to promise us."

"What?"

"Promise not to tell anybody what you saw today. Promise, and we'll go."

Bobby thought for a second. His parents had always told him how important promises were, and this one didn't seem right. It was like when they had promised to bring him back a sea shell from their trip. They wouldn't forget something like that, and Bobby knew that if he promised he would have to stand by it.

"How do I know you'll go?" he asked.

They glanced at each other, then back at Bobby. "We'll show you the ship. You can watch us take off."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Where is it?"

"Over here." They turned and walked across the grassy slope to a stand of trees. Bobby followed, and when he got right up to the edge of the woods, he saw something silvery back in the shadows. Bobby stared at it and made out the shape of a flying saucer, just like they had in the old movies on TV.

"Remember, kid," the second alien said. "You promised." The two of them slipped into the woods, and a few seconds later Bobby saw the machine rise into the darkening sky.

Bobby ran all the way home.

When he was halfway down the last block, he saw a familiar station wagon in the driveway and knew that his folks were back.

"Guess what!" he shouted as he ran in the door. "You'll never guess what happened to me today!"

"What's that, Bobby?" said his father, standing in the doorway to the living room. For just a second he had the light behind him, and Bobby thought he saw a greenish glow around him.

"Nothing," Bobby mumbled. "How was your trip?"

"Fine, Tiring. You wash up, and we'll tell you all about it at dinner."

"Okay." He started to turn away, then said, "Dad? Did you ... did you bring me anything?"

"Hmmm? What do you mean?"

"Never mind," Bobby said.

"Is something wrong?" Bobby's father stared at him, real hard, and Bobby felt his throat swell up so he could hardly swallow.

"No," Bobby said, and went back to his room.

He closed the door and opened the curtains and looked out at the stars. He kept thinking he would see one of them move, but of course none of them did. That would have been too easy, and Bobby suddenly knew that nothing was going to be easy anymore.

"I never promised," he said to the night sky. "I never promised."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A fast and far-out extrapolation concerning circular time, from Rudy Rucker, who has authored three sf novels, WHITE LIGHT, SPACETIME DONUTS and SOFTWARE, and a non-fiction book, INFINITY AND THE MIND. He lives with his wive and children in Virginia, where he is an associate professor of mathematics at Randoph-Macon Woman's College.

The Man Who Ate Himself

BY
RUDY RUCKER

Harry enjoyed driving, even though he'd never managed to get a license. He had a whole theory of it, a system of simultaneous differential equations which told he how fast to turn the wheel for a four-wheel skid on a tight turn taken too fast. "Controlled drift," he called it.

I drew my safety belt a bit tighter. "I'm driving on the way back to the airport, Harry. I only said you could drive on the way *to* Marston's. Remember that." It wasn't always easy to have a genius for a partner.

We were going at least fifteen miles per hour too fast. Harry was slouched back in his seat, stiff arms outstretched. He wore a forgotten smile and kept giving the wheel abrupt, precise little twitches. I had to think of Mr. Toad's wild ride. At least we were in open country.

We hadn't encountered another car for about five miles now. Harry was taking the curves wider and wider ... brushing across them and fishtailing out. Humming unhappily, I studied the map Marston had sent us. Crater Acres. We should be almost....

There was a wild squealing. I cried out something of a religious nature and threw my hands up to protect my face. The car bounced like a skipped stone, slowed and shuddered to a stop. The engine died. The sun was bright and hot.

"Pretty flashy, boys. And ah'd always thought you scientist fellas were a bunch of ribbon clerks. Welcome to Crater Acres!"

A limited-function android with a TV screen face pulled open the cyclone-fence gate Harry had stopped for. The android was dressed like a gun-slinger. Van Marston's familiar features grinned at us from the screen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Immediately beyond the gate, the vegetation grew lush. A mist clung to the heavily irrigated grounds. I couldn't quite make out the mansion I knew lay at the center.

As soon as the gate was fully open, Harry revved the engine up to a chattering scream and peeled out, kicking cubic meters of gravel up into a roostertail.

"YEEEEE*HAW!*" Marston's amplified voice whooped. The android drew a six-shooter and fired two shots after us. Presumably it had aimed to miss.

Marston had made his bundle in oil and uranium. He wasn't what you'd think of as a Friend Of The Earth. But now that he'd retired, he'd tried to fix up his Crater Acres estate like one of those wild animal parks. Some giraffes were stalking through the tall grass to our right, and just ahead of us a tremendous snake lay sunning himself.

Still accelerating, Harry detoured around the snake, knocking a cloud of winged insects out of the elephant grass. The unexpected lurch made me smack my head on the edge of the window. Suddenly I'd had enough.

I reached my left foot over and stepped on the brake. Hard. At the same time I took the key out of the ignition and pocketed it. Far behind us, the android fired another shot. You could hardly hear it over the steady chirping of the insects.

"Harry, the car's rented in my name. You could have broken an axle just then. And we've got some delicate machinery in the trunk. What are you trying to prove?"

We'd skidded to a stop half off the road, some hundred feet past that huge snake. It was watching us with glassy eyes, and seemed to be nibbling its tail. Marston's house was still out of sight.

Finally Harry answered. "You know how I feel, Fletch. I don't like Marston. He's stupid. He's a bully." Harry's hands clenched and unclenched on the wheel. "I knew a kid just like him in eighth grade. Donny Lyons. Every day Donny Lyons would knock me down and steal my dessert. Until one day I hid one of my father's false teeth inside a Twinkie." Harry let out one of his weird giggles.

"Look, Harry. Marston wants to give us a lot of money to help float his corpse in outer space forever. We're going to take the money. We need it because for some crazy reason you wouldn't let me market that waste disposal device of your...."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I *know*, Harry. Just let me finish. The point is that we can take Marston for a lot of bucks. You told me you don't see how his capsule can avoid crashing ... sooner or later. So just remember that we're screwing him. But, please, for God's sake, don't tell him. Then everyone'll be happy."

"Everyone except his wife."

"Look, how's *she* going to know if Marston's capsule falls into a star somewhere? As if she'd care anyway.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She's not even thirty! Now, will you trade places with me and let me drive?"

Harry opened his door and got out heavily. It was hot, and the plastic seat was sweaty where he'd sat. I waited a minute before sliding over. Harry stood next to the car and stared back at that snake.

"Isn't there some myth?" he said when he got back in. "About a snake who swallows his own tail?"

"Yeah. I don't know." I rolled up my window. There was something moving towards us through the tall grass on our left. It would by typical of Marston to have lions loose to handle intruders. I started up the engine and drove on.

There was a second fence around Marston's house and lawn. They were set in a crater-like depression a hundred meters across. The old man was out in front, leaning on a hoe and waiting for us. I couldn't believe how skinny he'd gotten. Lung cancer. He pushed one of the buttons set into the hoe handle. The inner gate opened for us.

"Welcome, boys! Welcome to my little Garden of Eden. Let me show you mah plot!" His diseased voice had a grainy, raucous quality.

I got out and went over to gladhand our pigeon, but Harry just sat in the car, ostentatiously picking his teeth.

"Y'all wouldn't have to do that if you'd stop eatin' flesh!" Marston called out to him. "*Live and let live.* It's Mother Nature's law!" Marston had been one of America's most vocal vegetarians for several years now.

Harry examined the end of his toothpick. "That's not what you said when you closed down the solar energy companies, Mr. Marston." He spoke without looking up. "Back then it was *eat or be eaten.*"

Marston looked back at me with a genial smile. "Guess ah've always wanted to see me a real genius. Now ah know." He hooked his thumb towards Harry and stage-whispered, "Looks lahk a cross between a cowpie and an albino toad, don't he?"

"Really, Van." A melodious voice came from the shady porch. "That's no way to talk about the author of The Geometrodynamics of the Degenerate Tensor?" In true Southern-belle style, each sentence ended as a question.

"Well, point mah head and call me doctor," Marston chortled. "Ah had no ideah!"

Evangeline Marston walked down the steps, a graceful arm outstretched. She wore a jiggling T-shirt and skintight red lamé jeans. I had to bite my tongue to keep from moaning.

"Don't listen to Van, Dr. Gerber. We're really so happy to meet you." Harry pocketed his toothpick and got out of the car with alacrity. He was as much of a horny bastard as the next man.

"I didn't realize you were abreast of current cosmological theory, Mrs. Marston." Harry's big livery lips stretched in a wet smile. "I'd be happy to send you some preprints."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, you would? I have the nicest little professor at Austin who'd be so delighted. And do call me Evangeline."

"Pleased to meet you, Evangeline," I sang out, and basked for an instant in her warm gaze. Harry grunted something similar.

"Y'all just have to come see mah crops now," Marston said, waving us around the house. "Ol' Eva and me have been livin' off the land, ain't we, sugar?" He gave the gorgeous red apple of her rear a lingering pat.

In back of the house Marston had his famous garden. He always had his TV spots filmed with him standing in it ... usually leaning on that goddamn hoe. All his companies had ever done was to rip the Earth off, but now the fact that he had a garden was supposed to make us forget all that.

For all Marston's talk about Mother Earth, you could tell that he had a crazy fear that the old girl was going to get back at him. He was so scared of ending up underground that he'd hired us to help him launch his corpse into outer space. According to his letter, he only had a few weeks left.

Evangeline walked in among the plants and tossed Marston a ripe tomato. He caught it and bit in thirstily, the juice runing down his knobby old chin.

"Why don't you just let Eva bury you in the garden?" Harry suggested with deliberate cruelty. "I'm sure you'd make good fertilizer."

A pulsing snake of a vein sprang into relief on Marston forehead. "That is *just*," he wheezed angrily, "what ah do *not* want to happen. As you verah well know, Mr. Genius author of 'Tense Jamaican Degenerates.' As you *verah* well know!" His dull old eyes brightened with fury.

I stepped in. We'd come here to close a deal, not to trade insults. "I'm sorry, Mr. Marston. Dr. Gerber has only been involved with the technical aspects. I'm sure he was not aware that...."

Gasping for breath, Van went on as if I hadn't spoken. Harry had struck a nerve. "Ah am not going to *rot* in the ground. And ah am not going to *burn* in no fire. I am going to stay just as ah am for evvah and a *day!*" He glared at Harry with pure hatred.

"Yes, sir!" I said with an ingratiating smile. "And Fletcher & Co. is going to make it happen for you. Your guidance system is in our car. All systems go! I've got the plans right here." I patted my briefcase. "If you'd care to...."

"I'm sure that you distinguished gentlemen must be absolutely famished?" Eva said, drifting out of the garden. The contrast between her swiveling hips and her refined, magnolia-blossom voice was exquisite. Those pants could have been painted on. Briefly I let myself imagine licking the paint off.

At lunch I was polite and shared Marston's stewed corn and zucchini. Harry and Evangeline had TV-dinners of Mexican food.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Eva don't like vegetables," Marston confided in me. "Ah have to eat just about evvathing that garden grows." A TV-screen-faced android cleared the dishes away.

The screen was playing an Old South movie starring Shirley Temple and Mr. Bojangles. "Oh my goo'ness," the android murmured, and set a bottle of bourbon on the table. Happily I poured myself a drink.

There really had been something special about the vegetables. Eating them had filled me with an unusual sense of ... completeness. "The soil is special," Marston was saying. I listened with a patient smile. "Mah plot is right on the spot where a meteor struck." He leaned across the table with an expression of senile cunning. "We found part of it, too. The remains of an alien spaceship. Ah made it into mah sarcophagus."

Harry had been busy watching Evangeline chew, but this last remark drew him into the conversation. "Chariots of the Gods, Mr. Marston? Fact is stranger than ficton, eh?"

That little vein on the old man's forehead popped out again. He stood up angrily. "You just come on out to the barn with me, toad-head. Ah have nevah...." A wet, heavy cough cut him off.

In an instant Evangeline was at his side. In between the brutal coughs Marston was gasping air with pathetic little whoops. His face was red, and his eyes bulged out. Suddenly a thick gusher of blood vomited out of his mouth. The eyes went out like lights. He was dead when he hit the floor.

Evangeline looked wild-eyed from him to me to Harry. "You..." she got in a thin strained voice. Then she began throwing things. A metal trivet caught Harry in the temple, but I managed to grab her wrists before she got the carving knives. I had been wrong when I'd said she wouldn't care if Marston died. I didn't know why, but she loved that scrawny old earthraper.

I was ready to forget the contract and leave, but the gate-control buttons were keyed to Marston's and Evangeline's fingerprints only. And Evangeline wanted to do things just as Marston had planned.

So I helped her put him in his cylindrical coffin. It was made of strips of wood fit together like a chinese puzzle. Marston had made it himself out of a cottonwood tree he'd cut down to dig his garden. We slid Marston in there naked and took him downstairs to the walk-in freezer.

The physical labor of hauling the coffin to the basement helped calm Evangeline down. I strained my back and ended up wishing I'd gotten the android to help. When the old man was stowed like he'd wanted, I helped myself to some more of his bourbon and sat down on the porch with Evangeline. The shrilling of the grasshoppers washed over us.

"Where is that awful toad-man?" Evangeline asked suddenly. It was not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clear to me what she wanted him for.

"Harry didn't kill your husband, Mrs. Marston. It was cancer. And, if you'll forgive my saying so, your husband's companies have probably led to more...."

"You don't have to tell me that, Mr. Fletcher. My husband knew what he did to the Earth. And he was scared the Earth wouldn't forgive him for it. That's one of the reasons...." Her voice caught.

"One of the reasons he wanted us to launch him into space," I filled in. "Well, it shouldn't be hard. He's already got the rocket?"

"Yes, we have it in an underground silo right over there." She waved towards the barn. "And Van and I built his own little capsule for him." She pushed her voice on. "All you and ... and Dr. Gerber have to do is to plan a course and install something to keep him from falling into any stars."

"He wants to float in outer space forever," I said. "That's fine with me. Let me show you how the system works." I got out some papers. I'd done most of the work on this one and was eager to impress this beautiful woman.

The heart of the system was a set of piezoelectric crystals. Whenever Marston's capsule approached a gravitating object, the tidal forces would squeeze a trickle of current out of one of the cyrstals. Each crystal was hooked in to a little ion jet. The result was that Marston's capsule would automatically adjust its path to avoid any star or planet which came its way. In the absolute cold of outer space, the crystal would be sensitive enough to react to a star that was still a light-year off. Since the guidance jets would react so early, they didn't have to be very strong.

"Yes," Evangeline said when I'd finished explaining. "But what happens when the jets run out of juice?"

I hadn't expected her to think of that. "The charge should be more than adequate for a thousand years," I extemporized. "That certainly...."

"It's not forever," she protested. "Van wants to last forever ... not just end up in some star a thousand years from now."

Harry ambled around the corner of the house. He looked like he wanted to laugh. Holding a tight, straight mouth, he took a seat next to me. There was a silence.

"I looked at it," Harry said finally. "I guess I owe Mr. Marston some sort of apology." Then, with terrible inappropriateness, he giggled.

"Looked at what?" I asked sharply.

"It's a little bit late for an apology, Dr. Gerber?" Evangeline spoke across me. Her voice was cold, but there was a hint of satisfaction in it.

"Do you think I could photograph it before...." Harry began.

"I'm not at all sure we're going to send it off," Evangeline replied. "Mr. Fletcher has just told me he can only guarantee a thousand years."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harry made a negative, frog-like face. "Fletch doesn't know what he's talking about. Once it goes into orbit around the galaxy, the energy requirement goes down to oh-point-zilch. I can promise you ten billion years. A whole cosmic cycle."

"What the lame-brained hell is a cosmic cycle supposed to be?" I burst out. Harry had hurt my feelings.

Evangeline seemed to know. "That's how long the universe lasts," she explained. "That nice little professor at Austin told me about it. Time is only supposed to be ten billion years long?"

"That's right," Harry said, with another giggle. "And wouldn't it be something if your husband's capsule lasts all the way? The first man to travel around time!"

I thought for a minute. "When you say *around*, do you mean...?"

Harry interrupted me. "I don't see why we shouldn't be able to get him launched tonight."

I took a long drink of my bourbon. Sitting in the middle of the crater containing Marston's house, I felt like I was at the center of a bull's-eye. The house, the lawn, the inner fence, the fake African savannah, the outer fence ... it was all Marston's, and I wanted to get out. I held my glass up to the setting sun. "So let's get to work."

We got the guidance system out of the car's trunk. We had six little ion jets coupled to crystal sensors, and a power pack to drive the jets. Microprocessors were built in. The pack was no bigger than a knapsack, but we had wedged enough unconfined quarks in there to run New York City for ten years. Two of Marston's nuclear-power plants had piped us the energy. If he was lucky enough not to have too many near misses, maybe he *would* make it into galactic orbit.

Evangeline brought the android over to help. The TV-screen face was playing a tape of Marston, in blackface, singing spirituals. Weird. Evangeline stepped forward and flicked a switch on the machine's back. It's face shrank to a point of light and winked out. The locusts shrilled on.

Nothing Harry or Evangeline had said had prepared me for Marston's capsule. It was like a giant razor clam. The two shell-halves were made of some shiny, lava-like substance. In back they were joined by metal hinges. In front they were propped open with a two-by-four. Inside was a cylindrical hollow, just the size of Marston's coffin.

"We found those ... windows in the garden", Evangeline said. "And there were some metal scraps we melted and cast into hinges. Van had the whole idea after he found the windows." The shock of her husband's death seemed to have worn off a little. Her halo of sexuality was building back up.

"They could just be silica that was fused when the meteor hit," Harry mused. "But those markings...."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I looked closely at one of the shell-halves. It was darkly transparent and was covered with scratches. The scratches were arranged in bands, and certain of them appeared over and over. It was easy to see how Marston might have convinced himself they meant something. I shuddered a little, remembering his thick, bloody coughing. I busied myself with the jets.

A few hours later we had the guidance system hooked up. It was basically just glued onto the capsule ... any touch of an atmosphere would have pulled it loose ... but we weren't planning for the capsule to ever go near an atmosphere once the rocket was launched.

Although there was no way to honestly predict what the capsule might encounter once it was a few dozen light-years from Earth, we had programmed in an overall course plan. The rocket Marston had hidden in the underground silo was to take the capsule out of the Solar System. Once in interstellar space, the rocket would eject the capsule. At that point our guidance system would kick on. Our basic principle would just be to avoid massive objects as they came up. According to our calculations, this would eventually get the capsule out into intergalactic space. So as not to have to deal with any more galaxies crowded with stars, we planned for the capsule to go into orbit around our galaxy once it got out there. Sooner or later it would have to fall back in ... but this wasn't exactly a short-term problem.

"The most important thing is that he doesn't come back to Earth," Evangeline reminded us. "Can you promise me that?"

I had known Harry long enough to read his expressions. Right now he was wiggly with surpressed laughter. I wondered how badly he'd sabatoged the guidance system.

"I promise you," I told Evangeline, giving her arm a kindly pat. Her flesh felt like warm marble. "I think we're ready to go."

Evangeline and the android went down to the freezer to get Marston. While they were gone I tried to pump Harry for some information, but he just grinned and took a few pictures of the scratches in that black glass. When Evangeline came back, the android's face-screen was back on. It was singing "Massa's in de Cold Cold Ground."

I helped them heave Marston's coffin into the capsule. I'd had those two bourbons. So of course I had to gash my finger on the rough edge. Some of my blood went with Marston.

The capsule was resting on a little dolly on tracks. While I nursed my cut, Evangeline pushed a button on the wall, and the capsule began rolling smoothly forward. Outside, a five-meter disk of sod lifted up to reveal Marston's personal hearse. A hydraulic lift eased the rocket up so that its hatch was level with the ground. Mechanical arms reached out and gently drew the capsule in. The hatch thud-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ded shut, and we were ready for launch. The sky was clear. It was almost midnight. The locusts had finally knocked off. In the distance I heard a lion's coughing roar.

"When should it go off?" Evangeline asked me in a silky whisper. She looked a little chilled in just that T-shirt.

I took my calculator out. I'd stored the master program last week. All I had to do was enter tomorrow's date, and the machine gave me the optimum launch time. "One thirteen," I replied. "a.m. Where's your console?"

"Inside." We followed Evangeline into the dark house. I felt better being there now that Marston was out of the freezer. Evangeline opened a rolltop desk in the living room to reveal the console. She punched *0113* and switched on the automatic sequencing. That was all there was to it. We had a little over an hour to kill. I got myself another bourbon. Harry and Evangeline stuck to soda.

Looking out the window at the rocket-tip protruding from the ground fifty meters away, something occurred to me. "That's kind of close, you know. The exhaust is liable to set the house on fire."

"Don't worry," Evangeline sang back. "The house is mostly titaniplast. Van had a lot of enemies."

That was a good lead-in for one of Harry's remarks, but he passed the opportunity up. He just leaned back in one of Marston's leather chairs, sipping soda and staring at Evangeline. She didn't look back, but you could tell she felt him staring. She kept finding reasons to stand up and lean over, with her prettiest feature aimed right at him.

When it got down to the last few minutes, we all stood by the window and counted down together. I had to hand it to Marston. It seemed like a great way to go. Just before blast-off, the android came out with a magnum of cold champagne. Knowing that Marston must have programmed that into the console sequencer, we drank long and deep with a clear conscience. And at one thirteen the big bird lifted off. Marston's lawn and garden were burned to a crisp, but inside his titaniplast house we didn't feel a thing. We stared upward until the tiny flame was lost in the stars.

I must have had most of the champagne, because I don't remember going to bed. All night I had whirlybed dreams. There was some trivial sequence of actions which I kept having to do — each completion was only a new beginning. The task had something to do with the scratches on Marston's capsule. They were sort of there, yet not there ... and it was up to me to make them real. But I couldn't read them until I'd written them, and I couldn't write them till I'd read them.

Finally I managed to wake up. Dawn. The house was quiet. I seemed to be in a guest room. On the other side of the room was an unmade bed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Where was Harry? Just as I stood up, he came padding down the hall. He had a funny expression.

"Let's go," he said shortly.

"OK. But where...."

"Never mind. Let's get out of here. Are you sober enough to drive?"

"Sure."

We went down and got in the car. Harry said I should just drive up the slope to the gate and honk. I did, and it swung open. Harry leaned out the car window, staring back at the house. Perhaps something moved at one of the windows. "I love her," he said, finally pulling himself back in.

"What happened last night? Don't tell me that she let you...."

Harry was close to tears. "She had a *mind*, Fletch. A body like that, and she'd even heard of my papers! I had her. I *had* her. But then I had to go and tell her. She'll never forgive me."

"You told her how you sabatoged the guidance system?"

"I *didn't* sabatoge it. I didn't have to. Time is a circle, Fletch. If she had really understood my papers, she would have known that. Time is a circle ten billion years around. And Marston's body is going to make the round trip."

I thought a minute. "So? That just means that there's *two* Marstons out there. There's the Marston we just launched, and there's the Marston who's traveled ten billion years around. One Marston is seventy and the other is ten billion and seventy."

"That won't wash, Fletch. What if we'd decided not to launch him? How would the ten-billion-and-seventy-year-old know whether or not to exist? A particle's world-line can't be like a thread winding around and around time. It has to close off, to come back on itself."

"I still don't get the point, Harry."

"The points is that circular time means the universe *repeats*. Every ten billion years everything comes back to the same place. It's like a pool table. If you plug all the pockets and hit a hard enough break-shot, the balls will eventually reform into the triangular pattern you started with. Every atom in Marston's capsule has to come back to where it started from."

Suddenly it clicked. "You mean the crater back there...."

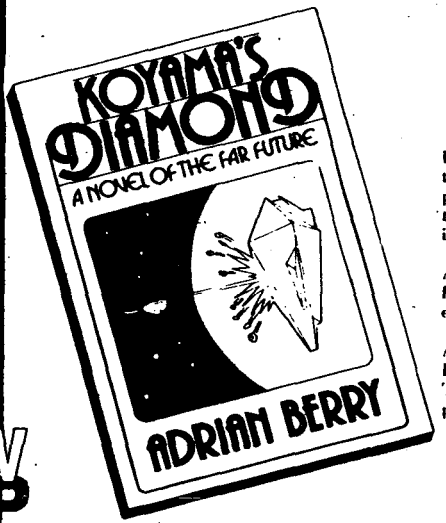
"Has to be, Fletch. *Has* to be! Marston's ship is going to go around time and crash there ... say, in 1100 A.D. There's probably even a Zuni Indian legend about it. And then Marston's capsule is going to lie buried until he digs it up five years ago. Sealed in the capsule is going to be some rotten compost which he is going to plow into his vegetable garden."

The joy of science had driven off Harry's sorrow at losing Evangeline. He gave a wild giggle. "And Marston thought he was a vegetarian! He thought he could avoid rotting on Earth!"

The same snake we'd seen yesterday was lying in the same place in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

KOYAMA'S DIAMOND



By
Adrian Berry

Ephraim Koyama announces that he can abolish inflation permanently by using a subtle principle of astrophysics. What this brilliant scientist doesn't reveal is that he is anxious to overthrow the government of Sarnos in the process.

A young crime reporter decides to investigate, only to find himself a part of Koyama's intricate tapestry of embezzlement, kidnaping and murders.

Adrian Berry, science correspondent for the LONDON DAILY TELEGRAPH and author of THE NEXT TEN THOUSAND YEARS, has written this fast-paced, suspense-filled story as his first novel. $11.95

Through your bookstore or postpaid from
VANTAGE PRESS, Inc. 516 W. 34th St., New York, N.Y. 10001

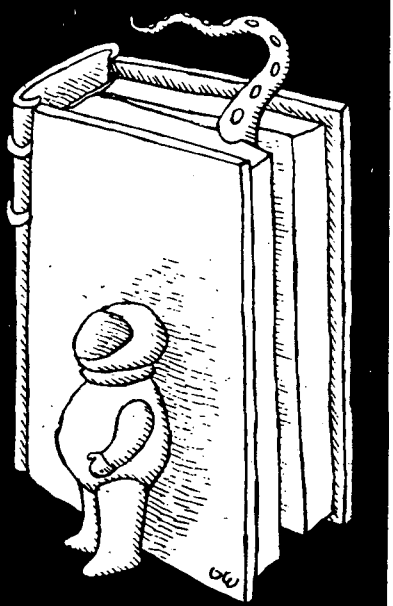
driveway. It had its tail tucked into its mouth. I down-shifted and skirted it. The android guard was already holding the gate open for us. The TV-camera over the gate scanned back and forth. For an instant the camera pointed at the android's face, and it became a TV screen with a picture of a TV screen with a picture of a TV screen with a picture of....

I pulled onto the paved road and started driving toward the airport. I had a hell of a hangover.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

JOHN CLUTE



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Darkworld Detective, J. Michael Reaves, Bantam Books, 1982, $2.50.

My Brother's Keeper, Charles Sheffield, Ace Books, 1982, $2.50.

The Last Yggdrasill, Robert F. Young, Ballantine Books/Del Rey, 1982, $1.95.

The Blind Men and the Elephant, Russell M. Griffin, Timescape/Pocket Books, 1982, $2.00.

Courtship Rite, Donald Kingsbury, Timescape/Simon and Schuster, 1982, $8.95.

Here are five books. They come from four different publishers, and are all paperback originals. One of them is fairly but not insultingly bad, one is competent but cursory, one is cursory but winded, one is long and intense but lacks either blind men or an elephant, and one is very long and exuberant and if it featured any blind men its protagonists would eat them. These books have been ranked in ascending order of ambition, which (unusually) is almost the same as their order of merit (according to me). At a time when all too many second-rate visions reach the marketplace positively dropsical with hype, it is worthy to note that none of the five books under review is unduly bloated. Indeed, the only real failure of means to end — Robert F. Young's *The Last Yggdrasill* — is a failure of excessive modesty.

We can start with J. Michael Reaves's dim but decent *Darkworld Detective*, a pottering assemblage of four linked stories. The Darkworld of the title is called Ja-Lur, and the sha-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mus is called Kamus. Ja-Lur is a Dark-world because its sun is so dim it even seems dim to its native inhabitants, and because the Darklord, whose domain is controlled through magic, dominates the dark side of the Dark-world. I have no idea why the shamus is called Kamus. Kamus the shamus stars in each of the stories, narrating each of them in a style about as close to Raymond Chandler as Kai Lung is to Confucius. And though each story takes its title, ostensibly with some reason, from a different famous Terran novel — two American private eye thrillers, one classic English detective novel, and the worst of the James Bonds — Kamus the shamus narrates each of them in exactly the same tone of voice, which, as the stories unremittingly resemble one another in almost every particular, may be fair enough, but which does rather beg the question of the nature of the homage being offered.

But this may be too harsh. Failed homage aside, what remains is mostly straightforward fun. As the book progresses, the shamus (a gumshoe) finds himself, because of his half-Dark blood and his far from inconspicuous position as the only detective on the planet, more and more deeply involved in a Ja-Lur-wide conflict between the forces of science fiction and heroic fantasy. The modus vivendi between the Darklord's fantasy domain and the Galactic Unity's high-tech interstellar imperium is beginning to unravel as Shadow-night approaches. Mysterious figures start trying to hire young Kamus. Mysterious assaults are mysteriously survived by the brave young detective, who is increasingly haunted by the mystery of his father, a mysterious figure from the Dark Lands who raped his mother and split. Mysterious omens point the shamus in the direction of the Darklord, who resides in the Dark Spire. I guess it was inevitable, he thinks. And off he goes into the Dark, dogged by whores, demons, ambitious women, bad beer, debutantes. lousy spells, walking skeletons, gods, dwarfs, giants, androids, millionaires, traitors, troubadours and bureaucrats, but nothing out of the ordinary; there in the Dark, in the caverns of the Dark Spire, Kamus (for it is he) duly works out his destiny, stitches the world back together again, and closes off his story by quoting the last lines of *Casablanca*.

What is there to complain about?

Far more energetic, and somewhat more culpable in its partial failure to deliver the goods, is Charles Sheffield's *My Brother's Keeper*. It's a very odd novel indeed. It starts off with some intensity to explore a split-brain problem to end all split-brain problems, but soon drops the issue like a couple of hot potatoes and sidesteps into an international chase thriller in which the guy(s) with the split brain hurtles around the world in search of a MacGuffin totally unrelated to his (their) intriguing dilemma.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What happens at the beginning of the novel is elaborately improbable but absolutely necessary if there's going to be a story at all. Pianist Lionel Salkind is contacted by Leo Foss, his identical twin, who is in some kind of deep trouble which soon comes home to roost when the brothers' helicopter is sabotaged and crashes, horribly wounding both of them. Lionel (who tells the tale) awakens in the hospital to discover that he has lost the right hemisphere of his brain, along with some other organs and little bits, but that Leo has not only lost the *left* hemisphere of *his* brain, but almost everything else as well. Leo is legally dead. But a brilliant bad-tempered brain surgeon, as Lionel further discovers, has planted Leo's right hemisphere like a hot potato into the vacancy in his own damaged skull, and Lionel has become his brother's keeper. Now it may be the case that the left hemisphere of the brain governs self-awareness as well as speech, but Leo soon starts homing in on Lionel like Palmer Eldritch, and it begins to look as though we're in for a pretty complex — and maybe pretty gripping — examination of anything and everything from mind/brain conundrums to the question of the real location of the identity function or soul, from doppelgangers through secret sharers through puppet masters, right on down to knock-knock jokes.

But it turns out that Sheffield has no intention of juggling these potatoes for more than a few pages. And what Charles Sheffield doesn't intend to do, Charles Sheffield doesn't do; he is a writer of considerable force and knowing clarity, even when he's playing hookey. With devastating speed, Lionel adjusts to the loss of half his brain, screws his nurse, gets kidnapped by the singularly incompetent hoods who are after the MacGuffin Leo seemingly stashed away somewhere, escapes, dashes to India, gets captured again, escapes, dashes to Arabia, traps a sadistic female villain in a zoo with hundreds of poisonous snakes, and finds the MacGuffin. And all the while Leo's left hemisphere plays knock-knock games with Lionel's right, augments his brother's powers whenever necessary, and seems thoroughly to enjoy the ride. As we do. We are carried along. But there is a point (it is the point when we are dumped off the last page) that some more serious questions come up. Will the Six Million Dollar Piano Man ever tickle the keys with feeling again? (Musical ability is centered in the left hemisphere, and Leo thinks Milhaud's a ski resort.) As surely as there will be further installments to this caper of the brother's keeper, just as surely Sheffield is going to have to begin to think about the issues he's left behind.

It's rather a shame about *The Last Yggdrasill*, Robert F. Young's overstretched novella in which humanity spreads to the victim stars, continuing to commit ecocide all the while. To begin with, there is something at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

heart of the concept of the Norse World-Tree that deeply precludes the notion of there being *more than one* of them. In any case, the underlying ecological puzzle is too transparently simple to fool even a farmer — even a *human* farmer. The Yggdrasill in question is the last of a species of apparently semi-sentient dryad-souled trees that have colonized the vast plains of Genji 5. Arriving much later on the scene, when only one huge tree remains to overshadow the mysteriously organic aboriginal village it dominates, human colonists soon hire an "interstellar tree-removal service" to get rid of what they consider an unsightly monster. But even the most careless reader will have noted that the terribly valuable crop which the colonists harvest only grows in proximity to this one remaining tree, and will not be surprised with the revelation at the end of the tale that this last Yggdrasill lay at the heart of a complex ecology — even the village is part of its root system — and that its destruction signals the end of profit-taking for the farmers.

Though eked out to bare book length by undue repetition of themes and omens we have already memorized, the story itself is strangely moving. The progressive murder of the tree, branch by branch, is genuinely painful reading. The owner and employees of TreeCo are all walking wounded; the desert they are hired to make of a world is convincingly analogued to the twisted poverty of their hearts. The central character, who is inv[illegible]um-surprisingly in a Young st[illegible]he long devastation of unhappy [illegible]ual passion, finds himself haunted by the dryad of the great tree (whom the Del Rey's artist renders as a dyspeptic Tinkerbell); the sense that to be a failed human is to contaminate the world pervades the text with resigned melancholy. Shorter, *The Last Yggdrasill* could have been a fable of some strength. Longer, which is enough room to portray a rational farming community (however unrealistic that might seem) and a genuine conflict between Progress and Life, we might have been gifted with a powerful novel about our state.

Precisely why Russell M. Griffin's hideous and hilarious third novel, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, benefits so much from being read as science fiction it may be of some interest to try to work out. As sf, it is certainly marginal. The action, which is tangled and mundane and permits no heroes, takes place in these days in the urban backwaters of a Massachusetts abandoned by the century and depicted by Griffin with the clammy obsessive surplus of detail-work that is a first sign of creative love/hate. Like John Sladek, some of whose techniques and concern he shares in this novel, Griffin exhibits all the buttonholing relentlessness of the born exile in his street-wise scrying of the alien habitat which immures him. The result is some remarkable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

snapshots of contemporary America.

But unlike Sladek, Griffin stops short of any attempt to render the world we live in as being not only foolish and cruel, but also unhinged at root. Absurd. Void of meaning. Too often in *Blind Men* sarcasm or a slightly creepy indignation tend to substitute for anything like a full depiction of the horrors Griffin — if his plot is any evidence — seems very clearly to want to grapple with. It is here, however, that the science fiction element in the book transforms missed opportunities into at least partial success, mundane sarcasms into fable.

Incompetent weatherman for a decrepit Mafia-linked local television station, for which he also serves as the rear end of a childrens'-hour horse, Burton Lessingwell thinks he may have struck it rich when he finds himself in control of a monstrous freak nicknamed the Elephant Man, presumably because of his resemblence to the real-life nineteenth-century English freak. But whatever's wrong with Macduff, the current Elephant Man, it's nothing so mundane as a mere sclerosis of nerve padding or whatever. Macduff is very weird, constantly in pain, and obscenely acute, though he can only remember flashes of what seems to be an impossibly brief life. Mainly he is able to recall flashes of his life in a Catholic boarding school whose corridors are crammed (a la Sladek) with venal and/or fetish-ridden priests. Indeed, his whole circumambient world — just like Roderick's in Sladek's 1982 novel *Roderick* — is suffused with avarice though here in backwater Massachusetts it's generally *failed* avarice. Burton Lessingwell certainly doesn't care much about Macduff's pain or his cruel narrow past, visualizing him as a human interest spectacle rather than as a person; soon enough, though, he's forced to sharpen his attention when he notices that he and Macduff are constantly being shadowed, day and night, by identical men in sunglasses, the Blind Men of the title.

From this point the plot darkens, in fact plunges sickeningly into a science-fiction explanation of how Macduff was manufactured about five years earlier *in vitro* out of (I think; I always bugger this sort of thing up) cancer cells extracted from a male gonad. But however it is put, it's clear that Macduff is nothing but a great bloated cancer, the ultimate homunculus, a walking contagion. And this last may literally be the case. The Blind Men — as in *The President's Analyst* from 1967 they are government agents — have been trying to trace Macduff after his escape from the lab and his disappearance from places like the school for orphans he had secretly attended, because he may be contagious as well as embarrassing. He may — or may not, for the novel ends before we can be told — be about to infect all of humanity with homuncular cancer (which tends to attack the skin or crust), in the same way that humanity has spread its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

contaminating urban detritus across the globe.

Or that's how I read the message behind Griffin's insertion of such a conception into the dying world of Butler, Massachusetts, though it's hard to know for sure, because the text ends before its implications have a chance to settle down. And I'm afraid that, without the aperture a science-fictional reading opens, the creation of Macduff might seem a particularly tasteless sample of Grand Guignol at its sensation-mongering worst. A science-fictional reading of Macduff opens his savaged state to all the cognitive exculpations that the genre can claim, sometimes with justice, to have a lien on. For genre readers, Macduff, presented in his anguish and terrible solitude and loathsomeness, may seem no more than an image of the Whole Man to come; MacDuff may *spawn;* MacDuff may establish paranormal empathy with the birds and beasts and lead them out of Hamelin; Macduff may be rescued by a wise man in a toga from the far future; Macduff may in truth be an alien and his parents are beaming in right now; or as an Immaterial Sentience Macduff may whisk himself off to the stars like a James Tiptree woman. Who knows?

All that we can say is that this exculpatory work is done for Griffin by the conventions he has invoked, and that it allows us to stomach the horrors and relish the hilarities of his text. All the same, there is a troubling vacancy at the heart of the book. We are more or less told that Macduff has begun life as a tabula rasa — blanker even than the infant robot in *Roderick*, that book this book so much brings to mind — and that he has had to assemble a human nature for himself. It does strike one that if this long problematic task of becoming human had comprised the hard knotted gravamen of *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, it might have been able to deal squarely, without resisting on exculpations to sanitize the text, with its nightmarish hero. It might have been a novel that stretched and tested — instead of hiding within — the boundaries of the genre. It's not enough to learn in passing that Macduff watches daytime television avariciously, and that he creates language and analyzes human behavior out of his experience of quiz games and soap operas, for that doesn't amount to much more than an old joke about American life, and no longer a very good one. There is a paucity here. Some central questions are being begged. What was potentially a large-minded black book of the soul turns out to be a jape. Hilarious certainly; but vacant, too.

Let us clear the air a little and finish off with a vibrant good-tempered saga about cannibalism and group marriages and war and great-hearted death rituals and family-dominated politics and explosive cultural breakthroughs, all played out against the harsh tapes-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tries of a world not entirely unlike *Dune's* but inhabited in this case by human types so drastically estranged from their off-planet origins that they think of the orbiting generation-starship that had dumped them here as God. They can know no better. But it is a sign of the muscular optimism of Donald Kingsbury's *Courtship Rite* — and of the enormous rewards he confers on those who are most successful in actually operating the world he has created — that this worship of a high-albedo God scouting across Heaven reads not as superstitious but as highly pragmatic, a winner's creed: God clearly exists, so you might as well believe in Him/Her; and to those who help themselves by believing, God has clearly in the past provided all sorts of highly remunerative Promethean hints and tidbits, for the tablets that fall out of the sky are memory chips, nor is there any sign that the largesse is about to cease. Sequels are promised.

So what Kingsbury has given us is a success story. Against the radical scarcity and general precariousness of life in the alien ecosystem of the planet Geta, his human outcasts have cobbled together for themselves a most remarkable culture. Cannibalism lies at the heart of the evolution of Getan life; it controls population growth, punishes the wicked by feeding the good, weeds out the unfit in childhood (though the reader may feel a bit queasy at how effortlessly Getans manage to define moral and other fitness in terms of their offsprings' luck at surviving highly competitive agonistic ordeals), controls warfare through the taboo against killing more than you can eat, and shapes the individual lives into a sociobiologist's dream of altruism, for, old Getans positively (though I suppose vicariously) *relish* the thought of being incorporated into the young of their clan. And human skin makes good hides, too. But much of the pleasure of the text lies in the gradual accumulation of significant detail designed to show how cannibalism and genetical expertise (the word for priest is biologist) and group marriages and clan-loyalties all intersect in a triumphant adaptive response to hardship, and I'll stop here.

The story that gives the book its title also works to demonstrate the triumph of the fittest. Already high in the councils of the ambitious and increasingly dominant Kaiel clan, a five-marriage (three brothers and two unrelated women) is told it cannot wed the brilliant scientist of its choice, but must instead court a stranger for reasons of politics. She turns out to be a heretical pacifist of great influence in an area the Kaiel are eager to dominate. The courtship turns out to be arduous, but the prize is power and glory and magnificent love-making. In order to assess her worthiness as a wife (and to keep the plot boiling for hundreds of pages), the most valor-obsessed of the brothers imposes a seven-step Trial of Death on the pacifist lady, which — need it be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

said — she eventually and triumphantly survives. And the other clans are defeated. And the brilliant scientist begins to transform all of Geta. And they all marry *her*, too.

This may seem cornball, but it's exhilerating to read. The only cornball element that fails to persuade is a most implausible spy/courtesan/clone member of the spy/courtesan/clone clan, who screws all the brothers in different guises and generally manipulates everyone from behind a plethora of arrases. Though she's an attractive enough creature, her presence is a gimmicky distraction in a novel that is patently meant not only to entertain but to make the reader think.

Of course even the best Libertarian science fiction scenarios are irremediably rigged, and in any case I'm by no means clear that Kingsbury would call himself a Libertarian, though it's certainly the case that as a metaphor for self-help and Social Darwinism in general cannibalism *does* have a vaguely non-Welfare-State ring to it. Perhaps in the end, it's impossible to dramatize an argument in a work of fiction without rigging the outcome. Kingsbury does so in a familiar way. Without quite making it clear that this is the case, Kingsbury rigs his Getan society so that its citizens have to be very accomplished at living in it to survive at all. But not only that. Getan society would patently fall apart in the absence of star winners like the members of the five-marriage who propel *Courtship Rite* along at such a breathtaking rate. Gaten society — like most Libertarian societies in fiction — can only be *worked* by that tiny minority of people who are not only far more intelligent and creative and serendipitous and combat-ready and tough and horny than any of us out here in the real world, but who also embody all these enticing attributes in a configuration that works precisely — *and only* — in terms of Getan society. So the argument is circular. The society is perfectly designed for those who can make the society work. Patting them on the back, it pats its own back. All others it eats.

So. As an ordinary person in a world that provides no clear moral or financial recompense for any behavior at all, I began to feel slightly framed by *Courtship Rite*. But this could be a cheap suspicion on my part. I'm not about to claim that, for Donald Kingsbury, cannibalism is a proper extension of Social Darwinism. And none of this should muffle the central fact that the book is a considerable accomplishment, that it's a feast (of the imagination) and great fun while it lasted, within its covers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mike Conner's last F&SF story was "Stillborn," (March 1982). This new offering is a gripping tale about a San Francisco antique dealer who attends a country auction and bids successfully on an old box that changes his life — in a most unpleasant manner...

The Corsican Box

BY

MIKE CONNER

It began at what I thought would be just another country auction up in Sonoma.

Sonoma's a wonderful little town, with a lush, palm-shaded plaza fronting its turn-of-the-century civic buildings. There's a bit too much nostalgic kitsch along Napa Street East, with its frozen yogurt stands and antique shops, but enough of the old town hardware stores and markets remain to give visitors a nice feeling of temporal displacement.

I cherish that feeling. It's one of the reasons I'm in the antique business myself.

Perri and I were heading for Emma McCandless' old place, east and above the town on Wood Valley Road. It turned out to be a rambling, whitewashed Victorian-style house: three-story turret furnished with curved glass windows in front, and a long, cool pergola behind smothered with heavy grape vines. The bidding would take place in the merciful shade beneath.

We parked in a field across the road from the house.

"Lots of people," Perri said. She'd been uncharacteristically silent ever since I'd picked her up at her apartment in San Francisco. I hadn't quite figured out why.

"It's the usual auction crowd. Let's have a look." I shepherded her into the kitchen, where odd lots of pots and pans and ancient gadgets like potato ricers were in boxes for the sale vultures to pick through.

"I wouldn't mind having this chopping table." Perri ran her hand over the fine maple top.

"You'd have to stand on it." It was just about the size of her kitchen, but my attempt at a joke backfired, and her face clouded again. I decided to distract her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hey. There it is." I pointed through the doorway into a sunny, informal breakfast room. In the far corner, glowing warmly between two lace-curtained windows, was my reason for driving all the way up here; number 16 in the sale catalogue, a cherrywood corner cabinet from the 1860s, made by a Swiss-American joiner named Fredrik Gnau. The Gnau was my baby. It wasn't a particularly rare or unusual piece — Gnau's shop had served the gentry of St. Louis and Chicago for almost thirty years — but it happened to match a cherrywood drop-leaf table and matching spindleback chairs that I already had in my shop. I had a customer — tiny, fussy, Mrs. Rosenburg — who was ready to drop a bundle for the whole ensemble, if I bid successfully today.

Perri had been to sales with me before and knew how to look at a piece without appearing too interested. We made a couple of leisurely passes, pretending to admire a sterling tea service. Meanwhile, I watched the other dealers for signs of interest. It seemed to be minimal, which improved my mood. The floor bid was $450, and I had calculated I could afford three times that amount. Now, however, I began to entertain hopes of getting a bargain.

"Russ?" Perri called me from the parlor.

"What's up?"

"I'd like your opinion." She stood in front of a big Wooton trunk-desk that had its writing table pulled out. On it were several metal and enameled snuffboxes, and a larger one that could have been for jewelry or cigars. The sides were clear pine banded with satinwood, and the inside was lined with cedar. On the inside cover were the jagged sherds of a shattered mirror. The outside had been done over, rather crudely I thought, with green paint.

"Number 24," I said, picking it up. "What's the catalogue say?"

"Corsican box. Circa 1880. Satinwood, walnut burl, cedar." She looked up eagerly.

"I think there's some marquetry-work underneath this paint." Perri brightened, for the first time all day.

"Monica would love this for a jewelry box." Monica was her nine-year-old daughter. For the past month, she'd been living with her father in Marin. The poor kid was the volleyball to be tossed side to side in the divorce settlement.

"D'you think you could get the paint off."

"Sure. And I can replace the mirror while I'm at it. That is," I said with a wink, "if you can handle the five-dollar floor bid."

She smiled and elbowed my ribs. Then as we headed for the grape arbor, she nuzzled me quite nicely.

"Russ, I'm sorry I've been such a grouch today."

"Forget it." I was just glad she felt better.

Outside, some high school kids

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were serving cold lemonade and hot coffee. The wind stirred the grape around a bit, and then the auctioneer, a local free-lancer named Charles Mundy, appeared. I'd had the pleasure of dealing with him before. He moved the lots quickly, with the intent of getting as much as he could. It was one of the motivations of working on straight commission.

I sipped my lemonade and thought about the picnic lunch I'd packed in the trunk of my MG, until Mundy got around to the Gnau. "Number sixteen in the catalogue," he said. "A lovely corner cabinet in cherry, framed in beechwood. Glad doors on top, plush-lined silverware drawers and linen drawers below. From the circa 1865 to 1875, Fredrik Gnau Cabinetry Works, St. Louis. We would like to start the bidding at four-fifty."

I kept quiet. Mundy's floor bids were not solid, as they would have been at a private auction house. What he couldn't sell this weekend would be shipped off somewhere on consignment. So he would soften a minimum bid if he thought it was necessary. He shook his head.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I asked for and got fourteen-fifty for a cabinet not half as nice as this one only last week."

"Three seventy-five," said an old man behind me.

"Thank you, Dad." Mundy got his laugh and took the bid. A lady in a straw hat bid four. I rejoined at four-fifty, and from there the bidding escalated rapidly with three other dealers contributing bids until the price reached a thousand dollars. From then on it was only me and the hat lady. Things were getting tense, honor and profit now being locked in a battle of inversed proportion.

"Twelve-fifty." My rival's voice was strained, for this was a quantum jump. Mundy watched me as I thought about letting her have the cabinet after all. There was some satisfaction in knowing I'd forced her to go higher than she'd wanted.

"Thirteen hundred," Perri called suddenly. People in the front turned around, and Mundy looked over the top of his glasses.

"Your bid, madam?"

"His. He's got something in his throat." When the laughter died down, I nodded my consent. The hat lady scowled deeply, checked her calculator, then called a bid of thirteen-fifty. This time I put my hand over Perri's mouth, and Mundy quickly gaveled the bidding closed.

I was a bit numb after that, but we stayed long enough for Perri to bid on — and get, for $35 — the painted Corsican box she wanted for Monica. On our way back to the MG, the hat lady stopped to shake hands and offer condolences. She knew how I felt. The same thing had happened to her plenty of times. I knew she wanted to invite us to have a drink back in town, but I put my arm around Perri and moved off before she made her offer. I wanted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to nurse my wounds in relative peace.

We drove to the Buena Vista winery for our picnic. It was a beautiful spot. The wine cellars had been chiseled out of a limestone bank by coolee labor about the time Fred Gnau had been turning out cherrywood cabinets back in St. Louis. Perri found us a table beneath a pair of towering eucalyptus, where we could listen to the music of a creek below us, and the gentle humming of bees in the blackberry brambles. I didn't have much to say at first, until Perri tapped my wrist with a baguette of bread.

"I thought you were supposed to be cheering me up."

"Fourteen hundred might have sunk her," I said.

"Her and you both."

I couldn't argue with that.

"And, anyway, we've got the box." She lifted the top and stared for a moment into the broken mirror. Her face clouded. "I hope I'll be able to give this to her."

"What are you talking about? Is Gerald giving you trouble again?"

She nodded. "He read me the riot act last night. He doesn't approve of my going to art school on his alimony. He doesn't like Monica staying in the city in my apartment. 'That hole in the wall' is what he called it."

"He's got a hole in his head."

"There's more. You."

"Me?"

"He's never liked you. In fact—" her voice caught — "he's threatened to get a court order denying me custody. On the grounds that we're cohabitating."

"Cohabitating!" That sounded like Gerald. One morning I'd answered the door when he'd come to see Perri about some business. In my bathrobe. He'd made it quite clear that he did not approve of his ex-wife "screwing around," as he later put it so tactfully.

"He doesn't want me to ever see her again. My own daughter!" Her eyes misted. Suddenly she looked so fragile that I knew I'd somehow have to hold her together.

"Look, Per, have you talked to your lawyer about this?"

"No. I only spoke with Gerald last night."

"Well, you know how Mr. Macho operates. He's blowing smoke. Trying to soften you up for something else."

"I don't think so."

"When will you see him next?"

"Wednesday. When he brings Monica home. If he brings her."

"He'll bring her. If he's at all serious about going to court, he'll have to obey the custody terms until they're changed. When he comes, I want to see him."

"But he's threatened to do something—"

"Like beat me up?" I flexed my bicep. "He may be big, but I'm fast."

"This isn't funny," Perri said, laughing anyway.

"I know it's not. But we're all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

adults, and I'm sure we can come to an understanding." I took her hands. "Perri, you're a good person and a wonderful mother, no matter what the incredible bulk says. Monica's crazy about you. And so am I."

"You may have to prove that statement," she said, closing the box.

"When?"

"That," she smiled, "depends on how fast you can drive."

My Monday mornings in the shop were usually spent clearing the decks. There were the books to do from the weekend, when Gert had been minding things, some letters to answer, and then I took time to look over the stuff my runners had culled from the local garage and tag sales. This time, they'd picked up a cute collection of cut-glass owls and a painted board with several hundred beer and soft-drink bottlecaps from the 30s and 40s nailed on. Customers liked stuff like that on College Avenue. I tagged the merchandise, did a little dusting and rearranging out front, and then decided to close for lunch so I could work on Monica's box.

It was the first chance I'd had to really look at the workmanship, which was craftsmanlike, but not really elegant. It was false-mitered on the corners, with hand-cut screws and hinges of brass. That meant the box might be considerably older than the 1880 Mundy claimed in the sale catalogue.

I measured the top and called the glass company down the street to have a new mirror cut and drilled. When I removed what was left of the old one, I got a surprise: underneath it was glued-on, yellowed parchment covered with hand-written verses in faded ink. I'm certainly no expert when it comes to old manuscripts, but the language seemed to be Italian, boldly, almost angrily stroked nearly the full width of the box top.

This was a bonus. I got my Polaroid from my desk, slipped an enlarging lense into the clip-on plastic frame, and took several close-up shots. The verse reproduced beautifully. Now my curiosity was piqued. I got out my encyclopedias and looked for entries under Corsica. It turned out that rocky island hadn't much of a native furniture industry, being timber-poor. But I found out that Genoa had maintained an occupation in Corsica for almost 400 years during the Middle Ages and the fine joiners and cabinetmakers had worked in the northern mercantile city. Perhaps the box had been made there, and brought to Corsica by one of the dukes sent to maintain Genoese power.

It was fascinating to think about where the box had been, who had owned it. I liked that kind of mystery. It was good therapy for me and, sometimes, very good business.

Daydreaming that way, I got out the paint remover and brushed some over that awful green paint on the top.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The solvents blistered it almost immediately. As I waited for them to penetrate, somebody tapped on the window in front of my shop.

Mrs. Rosenburg. She waved anxiously when she saw me. So I wiped my hands and went up to let her in.

"Oh, Mr. Boehm! I do hope I'm not keeping you from something important." She looked over my shoulder at the drop-leaf table and spindleback chairs I'd hoped to sell her.

"Not at all. In fact, I was about to give you a call. Unfortunately, I ran into some bad luck at the McCandless sale."

She looked at me sternly. Mrs. Rosenburg had taught second grade for twenty-five years; now, I felt like one of her squirming charges, fresh-caught pulling pigtails in the back of her classroom.

"I have the card from the dealer who did get it," I put in quickly. "I'm sure she'll give you a good price." Mrs. Rosenburg said nothing, but sat down in a rocking chair and took out a notebook from her purse.

"I want you to see something, Mr. Boehm." She gave me the notebook. There were numbers in a neat column, just the way Mrs. Rosenburg would have written them on a blackboard.

"The bottom figure is what I can afford to spend on your lovely table and chairs."

The amount was enough to tempt me if business had truly been poor, but almost nothing when I figured in the time it had been on the floor, with taxes and lights and all the rest. Very reluctantly, I shook my head.

"Can't do it, Mrs. Rosenburg." She sighed.

"It would have been so much better if you'd got the cabinet."

"I tried," I said.

"The cabinet's what I really must have."

"I understand."

She put the notebook back in her purse and headed for the door. Then she turned, brightening.

"But I'll wait a day or two before I contact this dealer. You never know what might happen!"

I waved ruefully. Then I went back to my Corsican box. When I rubbed the top with some steel wool, the dissolved paint came off in a single sheet. And then I dropped the steel wool, for I was not prepared for what I found underneath.

A man's face.

It was there, clear as a photograph in the bleached walnut inlay: narrow, mouth open slightly as if in surprise. A thick reddish mustache. And eyes, deep and flashing as the wood grain that formed their image, open wide in unmistakable terror.

Accidents of nature I'd seen before, forms of animals or trees captured in the curly figures of cut wood. But never anything like this. I took some shots with the Polaroid. Then, as the solvents evaporated, I watched the face fade back into the unfinished flat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ness of the veneer. I was still trying to get over the shock when the shop bell rang. Oddly enough for a Monday, the rest of the day was quite busy.

Late in the day, the glass company delivered my mirror. I used new screws and nice chrome rubber-lined washers to fasten it over the parchment, and when I finished, the box closed perfectly. Now it had a face on both sides. Maybe the joiner's idea of a joke when he'd made it.

Before I went home, I applied a coat of cut shellac to the top so it could dry overnight, but I was disappointed: for some reason, the face did not come up. The structure was still there, but somehow the elements in the grain no longer combined in the same vivid way. Maybe it was just as well. I'd been having second thoughts about giving Perri something as weird as that. Anyway, I still had my snapshots. I took them home with me when I finished. Somehow, I didn't like the thought of leaving them in the shop.

On Tuesday I left Gert in charge of things so I could make the rounds of the Galleria in San Francisco. I was looking at some mission-style pieces — all the rage with decorators at the moment despite dark unattractive woods and clunky lines — when I ran into Charles Mundy.

"Russ! What luck. I've been trying to get in touch with you all morning." I figured he wanted to tell me about his next sale; instead, he nearly floored me by asking whether I was still interested in the cherrywood corner cabinet.

"Why? Have you seen another one like it?"

"The Gnau's still in Sonoma. The woman who bought it called me late yesterday and said she'd stopped payment on the check."

"Nice of her."

"We were just loading it onto a truck, as a matter of fact. But she said something had come up, and she needed the cash. Emergency situation."

"That's too bad," I said, trying not to sound too eager.

"Normally, I'd send it down here with the rest of the unsold things for consignment. But I know how interested you are in the piece. I'm willing to let you have it for what she paid. Thirteen fifty.

"My last bid was thirteen," I said, surprising myself a little. After all, Mundy was trying to do me a favor. But he swallowed his frown and agreed. I got out my checkbook, and we concluded the deal right there.

"I can ship it if you like."

"Better send it to the store." I remembered Mrs. Rosenburg saying she wanted to paint her dining room when she finally got the set.

"No problem. As long as you don't cancel your check."

We laughed, and then I thought of something. "Say, Charlie, do you remember that little box Perri and I got? Number 24, the one with the green paint?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He thought a moment. "Oh, Corsica, right?"

"That's right. You happen to know anything more about it?"

"Not really. Only that Rose McCandless — Emma's daughter — made a big stink about my listing it. She wanted it thrown away. I told her I thought I could get a few dollars for it, and that seemed to satisfy her — except she insisted it be out of the house by Saturday afternoon." Mundy shook his head. "Strange old bird."

"How so?"

"Well, for one thing, she wouldn't go inside her mother's house. They'd had some sort of long feud. In fact, she said she hadn't visited her mother since the fifties."

"Scottish stubborness?"

"Emma McCandless wasn't Scots. She was a French citizen, born and raised in Corsica. See, her husband Jimmy made a fortune there and in France after the First World War selling root stock from Sonoma grape vines that were resistant to phylloxera. You know, the grape blight. Most European wine has American ancestors."

"I'll remember that the next time I drop a twenty for some Muscadet."

"Do that. Anyway, Jimmy married Emma and brought her home to the big house he'd built. He was trying to buy up some of the property around it to start his own vineyard, when he got into some kind of trouble. Locals objecting to the pushy rich newcomer. I guess the pressure finally got to him."

How so?"

"They found him one morning hanging from an oak tree with a suicide note in his back pocket. Little Rose couldn't have been more than two or three at the time."

I checked my watch. "Charlie, you're a fountain of lore. But I promised to meet Perri for lunch in about fifteen minutes, and if I don't show, I'll be hanging."

We shook hands. "Thanks for thinking of me."

"Anytime. Give my best to Perri."

I whistled all the way downtown, but when I found Perri at a soup-and-salad place off Union Square, she was too distracted to appreciate my good fortune. Gerald had been making more threats.

"I just don't want to talk about it today, Russ," she said. So we ate our soup more or less in silence. I was annoyed with her. And, strangely enough, I found myself empathizing a little with Gerald. I could understand how Perri frustrated him. She was the type of person who absorbed every blow without crumbling, or even bruising much. Even after he'd long since turned her to pulp inside with his bullying, she'd never once given him the satisfaction of knowing he'd reached her. I had a feeling that if things ever got bad between Perri and me, she'd never let me know either.

It was not a good way to disgest

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lunch, and I did my best to end it on a brighter note.

"I've almost finished with the box," I said. "I'll bring it with me tomorrow night."

That cheered her up some, but as I left the restaurant, I caught something in her eye I'd never seen before.

Doubt.

I didn't feel like going back to the shop right away after that. Instead, I drove over to Berkeley and the UC campus, where, after a bit of wandering, I located the Italian Department in Dwinelle Hall, just inside Sather Gate. The department secretary was very helpful. She promised to give the Polaroids of the verse to one of the professors, and paperclipped them together with one of my business cards. Someone would call me in a day or two, she said.

It was almost three by the time I got back to College Avenue to relieve Gert. She was a bit huffy about my being gone so long but recovered when I told her about the corner cabinet. As soon as she left, I gave Mrs. Rosenburg a call.

"Oh! That's simply wonderful! What did I tell you about waiting?"

Then I gave her my firm price for the set — several hundred dollars above the figures I'd seen in her notebook. There was a long moment of silence where I almost panicked, but I held on, and finally she swallowed the deal properly and promised to stop by Wednesday morning with a check. I felt quite proud of myself as I put sold stickers on the tags tied to the table and chairs. A few more browsers came in. It was past four-thirty by the time I finally got back to my Corsican box.

The shellac had dried nicely. I put a lump of furniture wax inside a cloth and went over the top, then buffed it to a satin sheen. Now, the face was nothing more than an oval without features. It was the damnest thing. The wide eyes and mustache were gone. And yet I had snapshots that showed the face quite clearly. So I knew I hadn't been imagining seeing it. Puzzled, I opened the top.

It was a shock to see my own face captured like a genie. My reflection looked startled; then it grinned as I realized that for a moment, I hadn't recognized myself.

"Russ, boy, I think it's time you went home," my reflection told me. Then we both laughed, perhaps too loudly, until I closed the cover and went home for the night.

Then came Wednesday.

I was in a fine mood as I drove across the Bay Bridge with the Corsican box wrapped in pretty paper and a couple of Mumm's on the passenger seat. The day had gone splendidly. Not only had Mrs. Rosenburg and I concluded our transaction, but I'd managed to sell a few other pieces as well, including the cut-glass owls at a price fifteen times what they were really worth. Fortunately, Gert hadn't been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around to witness that bit of piracy.

And Perri seemed happy too when I got to her place. She'd skipped school to get everything ready and cooked a beautiful leg of lamb — Monica's favorite — and a four-layer, double fudge cake. Perri hummed to herself happily as I put the champagne into the fridge. Best of all, when I kissed her — tentatively — she responded affectionately and with more than a hint of passion.

"Mmm," I said. "That is not the kiss of a married woman."

"Good of you to notice."

"I hate to bring the subject up, but what about Gerald."

"There's a truce on," she said. "My lawyer and his lawyer arranged it until we can reach some sort of compromise."

"At least somebody's got some sense." We kissed again. The doorbell rang.

"Can you get it? I've still got my hair to fix."

"What if it's Gerald?"

"He's not due for another fifteen minutes. Go on, he's never early."

"Okay." I buzzed the downstairs door and then, feeling nervous and fidgety, snatched up the gift-wrapped box.

Gerald came up to the landing. And stopped, and scowled. Monica ran past him. "Russ!" she cried hugging me. "Where's Mom?"

"In the bathroom." My eyes were on Gerald. He stood on the landing with his lantern jaw working, all 6'2" of him in his London Fog topcoat and clunky Montgomery Street brogues. He was built like a Wooton desk, and I could tell he'd forgotten all about the truce. Nevertheless, to please Perri, I offered my hand.

"Get the hell out of my way." He stormed into the apartment and lit into Perri while I stood there like an idiot. Their discussion didn't take long. Gerald reappeared pulling his daughter by the arm, Perri following looking sick and confused all over again.

"Hey," I demanded. "What do you think you're doing?"

His answer was to push me against the wall. That's when I snapped. Gerald and Perri were divorced. She had every right to invite me over; Gerald, no right at all to put his hands on me. I had never been much of a fighter. But I turned around quickly and put the gift-wrapped box in Perri's arms.

"I'll be right back," I said in a thin, calm voice.

I caught up with them in the street. Gerald's gold BMW was double-parked, and he'd already shoved his sobbing daughter into the back seat. Surprise flashed across his face when I spun him around, quickly replaced by triumph. This was something he'd wanted for a long time. He launched a left that would have taken my head off if I hadn't ducked.

But like a lot of hookers, he left himself open for the straight right hand. I gave him one. He crumpled, but didn't drop. Then the battle was on in earnest.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The first thirty seconds seemed like thirty minutes, as everything I fired landed. I bloodied his nose and his mouth until he leaned back, shocked and almost out, across the hood of his car. That's when I grabbed his lapels and started banging his head. Liquid fire ran up my spine and powered my arms. I dealt my rage out in short, efficient bursts that would pound him into submission.

I might have finished him if Monica hadn't screamed. When I half-turned, Gerald finally connected with the hook in an explosion of stars. I grabbed at them as I staggered back, but they dissolved in my hands. I was only vaguely aware of the sound of tires squealing. Then, for a long time it was quiet. The stars popped out one by one, and then I heard Perri crying softly over my head.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed, when I tried to get up. There was hatred in her face, and I knew it wasn't for Gerald. It was for me.

"He had it coming," was all I could think of saying. She threw the Corsican box at me, and, somehow, I thought it more important to keep it from breaking than to smooth things with her.

By the time I figured out my mistake, she was gone.

I answered the phone on the sixth ring. It had taken me that long to struggle out of bed and limp across the living room to get it. Gerald's left hook traumatized me from the jaw on down.

"Mr. Bo-hem?" A lifting accent I couldn't place. "This is Cervione."

"You've got the wrong number."

"You are the man who brought the verses to the department office on Tuesday?" He pronounced it "Tew-ez-day."

"Oh. Yeah." At the moment I didn't feel like to talking to him. "Can you mail me the translation or something?"

An insulted pause, then: "I have it nicely typed by the department, Mr. Bo-hem. And some additional material you should consider interesting."

"Okay. When's a good time?"

"I shall be in my office another two hours. After that I leave for Tahoe for some vacation."

"I'll be down," I said, having realized it would probably be better if I kept moving today.

At the *Dottore's* office I had to step over his packed suitcases. Cervione turned out to be a spiffy little man in summer flannels and a three-day beard. I managed to get into his chair without creaking too loudly.

"How glad I was to see this material," he said. "This is not a good time of the year for me. Too much of the casual attitude after June. Ah, but why not? When the nights are warm, the heart reaches in like so and takes control of the head." He yanked in his fists to show what he meant.

"What about the verse?"

The *Dottore* handed me a typed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sheet. On the top half was a transcription of the Italian; below it was the English rendering, which wasn't exactly Shakespeare. The unrhymed stanzas seemed to be a syrupy love poem, full of things like, "My sweet! My tangerine!" I winced. But at the end of the second stanza the tone changed. "They have taken you," it read. "Spawn of motherless dogs have cut you off. Now their very hair shall burn!"

When I looked up, Cervione was grinning at me. "Better and better, eh? Now look at the final stanza."

I read:

"You have taken this land and I cut this tree for you.

You I cut, son of Satan, your entrails in this box!

The Spirit of the Wood is your jailer,

And by his will are you damned before the eyes of God."

"I have a recording," the *Dottore* said, "made in Corsica some years ago. It is of verses very similar to these."

He turned on his recorder, and a woman's voice came through the speaker. It was nasal, rough, the voice of someone old, and she spoke in singsong phrases with the end of each line cut off sharply inside her throat. What began as a dirge became a wailing and then something hateful, a shrieking that gave me chills. By the end of it, Cervione's grin had disappeared. He shook his head sadly as he turned off the recorder. "So many killed because of that," he said.

"What is it?"

"A *voceru*. Improvised verses given by a woman known as a *voceratrice*. In the old days, in Corsica, each clan had its own. At funerals when a son of the clan lay murdered, it was up to the *voceratrice* to incite the family to vengeance. You know the vendetta?"

"I've read about it. In Sicily."

In Corsica, in the old days, much, much worse. Once emnity had been declared, no man in either family was safe. After each killing the nearest male relative must take revenge, take a male life. Sometimes, there were those who had no stomach for the killing. But at the funeral he would hear the *voceru* and be caught up in the power of the *voceratrice*. It was more than most men — or sometimes women — could resist. It sounds barbaric, Mr. Bo-hem. It *is* barbaric, but when in the old days there is no state or law to punish crimes, such justice exists."

"All right. But do you have any idea why a *voceru* would be written down and hidden beneath a mirror on a fancy box?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps the vendetta involved the family of a *signore* or one of the foreign dukes. The *voceru* mentions the taking of land. The verse might have been hidden and the box given to the *signore* as a way of cursing him."

I thought of the smashed mirror and the green paint. It had to be more than a coincidence that someone tried to destroy what had been built into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

box to begin with. And then I remembered the story about Jimmy McCandless: how he'd been found hanging from a tree in the field he intended to plant with grapes.

"May I have this paper?"

"In exchange for your snapshots, yes. I would also very much like to see the box itself someday. Corsican culture and history is a special interest of mine."

"Maybe when you get down from the mountains," I said, thanking him. I wished him good luck at the tables. Maybe some would rub off on me.

I went back to the shop and called Charles Mundy. My check had cleared the bank, and he was quite cordial and willingly gave me the information I requested. After I rung off I unwrapped the Corsican box and took it with me back out to the car, telling Gert as I went past her that I wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

"Oh, and if Perri calls," I said from the door, "tell her I'm sorry."

The asphalt was already melting in Santa Rosa by the time I got there just after one o'clock. I stopped at a Seven Eleven for a Slurpee and bought a street map of the town. A few minutes later I found the address Charles Mundy had given me.

Miss Rose McCandless lived at the end of a U-shaped, white stucco motor court that had been converted to housekeeping apartments. Bits of tile from the crumbling roof littered the buckled sidewalk underneath the eaves. A line of ants marched steadily up the wall by her doorbell. I pushed it several times without result. Then I knocked.

"What do you want?" Yelled through the door.

"My name is Russ Boehm. I'm an antique dealer—"

"Sales over. Everything's gone."

"I know. I bought a few pieces that I'm still curious about." Silence. "I only want to ask a few questions."

Slowly, reluctantly, she opened the door. The only light in the room came from a huge color television set in the corner. Miss Rose McCandless looked me over. She was tall and thin, dressed in a black sweater and slacks, with her white hair pulled back tightly and tied with a black scarf. I could hear the air conditioner laboring inside the kitchen window as she let me in.

I gave her my card. "I was just up at your mother's house this weekend. Beautiful place." I wondered why her daughter would live in a dungeon like this. She grunted, resigned to the intrusion, and put my card on top of the space heater.

"Would you care for some tea, Mr...."

"Boehm. Yes, that would be nice."

As though she'd anticipated having guests, she returned from the kitchen with a tray only moments later. Rose McCandless seemed to float across the tiny living room, perfectly composed,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

erect, expressionless. She poured out two cups and offered me a crepe horn dusted with powdered sugar. I bit it gingerly so it wouldn't crumple onto my shirt; meanwhile, Rose poured three or four drops of something spicy — oil of cinnamon, I guessed — into her tea.

"These are very good." She paid no attention to the compliment. She was busy dabbling her fingertips into the teacup.

"Ask your questions." Rose frowned and stirred her tea again.

"Well, a friend of mine bought a green wooden box at the auction. It had a mirror inside the cover, and when I was working on it, I found some verses written on parchment underneath."

Rose's eyes lifted from the cup and bored into mine. They were jet-black and awesome in a way that is difficult to describe: malevolent, yet without the personal rancor of true hatred. I'm sure she gazed at her television with that same cold stare. I clutched my teacup and gulped tea that was much hotter than I preferred.

"The box belonged to my mother," Rose said abruptly.

"I know. That's what I'm curious about. The wood underneath the paint is very beautiful, and I just can't understand why she would have painted it over."

"You know," she said. The nape of my neck went prickly, but I tried laughing it off.

"I wish I did. If I could authenticate the age, I'd know better how much I could expect to get for it."

"Got it with you?"

"In the car. I can bring it—"

"Don't bother!"

"Surely you can have a look at it. I've come all the way from Oakland—"

"Stop it!" Her voice rose just a touch. "Stop wasting your breath. You know as much about the box as I do." She showed bleached-white teeth. "The difference is, you won't admit it to yourself."

"Look," I began, wanting to flee, "maybe I've caught you at a bad time."

"Things are changing for you now, since you bought it. You've felt your business improving."

It wasn't a question. And on paper, this week had been the best the shop had done in ages. I watched her stir the tea again.

"You think no one can stop you from doing what you want. But now the people who have always trusted you are a little confused. Isn't that true? Isn't it?"

I took a breath.

"Here." Rose tilted her teacup. "The oil drops won't come together. In the old country, my mother's family were *signadore*. They would have said this meant you suffered the *mal occhio*. The evil eye. I knew as soon as you came into my house. You stink of it."

I told myself this was ridiculous. Rose was only a crazy old woman who lived next door to bikers. How could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she know anything about me? How could cinnamon drops in a teacup mean a damned thing?

"Drive out to the beach," she said. "Take that box and fill it with rocks and throw it into the sea." Suddenly she grabbed my wrists with her dry, bony fingers. "It made my poor mother a widow. It has done this to me. My father thought he could use it to make his fortune, and it destroyed him. If you value your own life, do as I say."

I pried loose and backed away, afraid she'd fly at me, screeching. But the intensity faded from her face, and she sipped her tea with the same unconcerned malevolence I'd seen when I first came in. I mumbled an apology for interrupting her afternoon. Then I saw the photograph on the wall over the space heater.

There was a woman in a black dress, young, but otherwise very much like Rose. Standing next to her with his arms around her waist, was a man with a narrow face and a wide mustache. His mouth was open, as though he'd been talking to the photographer.

It was the same face I'd seen when I stripped the green paint from the top of the Corsican box.

Rose McCandless' father.

On the way back from Santa Rosa I very nearly took Rose's advice. Gradually, though, my shock and panic subsided. I told myself it was a wooden box, nothing more, nothing less. True, some unsettling things had happened in my life lately, but, then, what living, breathing member of the human race had ever been spared an occasional run of bad luck? Everyone in the world had changed since last Saturday, when you got right down to it. And there was no such thing as Evil Eye, unless you chose to pretend it existed and fall victim to the power of your own imagination.

By the time I got back to my apartment, my logic rescued me. I enjoyed an excellent steak with mushrooms and a seven-year-old bottle of Mondavi Cabernet. Gert called and reported that Mrs. Rosenburg's corner cabinet had arrived safely. Really, the only cloud remaining was my problem with Perri.

I decided to give her another day to cool down. By tomorrow, I was sure that not having Monica would make her angry enough at Gerald to forget what I'd done on Wednesday.

Just before I fell asleep that night, I thought about the verses Cervione had translated for me. Perhaps the wood in my box did have a spirit, I reflected. But it certainly was a benign one.

At three thirty that morning I was blasted back to consciousness by my telephone. It was the dispatcher from my burglar-alarm company. Could I come to the shop? There'd been an accident and the front window was smashed.

I prepared myself for the worst as I drove down the hill. I'd been burglar-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ized before, and so had most of the other businesses along my stretch of College Avenue. It was one of the prices you paid for hanging a shingle in the bohemian district.

But I wasn't prepared to see the street turned into a white-water river. Or to see a white Volvo bobbing it's front end three feet over the gusher from a sheered-off fire hydrant. Half a dozen Oakland firemen in black rubber coats stood around gawking at it. Behind them, a video crew from one of the local television stations recorded the spectacle for the amusement of their dinnertime viewers.

I waded through knee-deep water toward the alarm company rep, who was talking to a fire captain and one of the cops on the scene.

"I'm the owner," I said. I wouldn't have blamed them for laughing, but they kept their professional cool.

"Looks like a case of drunk driving," the cop told me. "Knocked off the hydrant and got hung up."

"Main force of the water went through your window," added the fire captain. "We'll have the main shut off in a minute or two."

"You didn't happen to catch the idiot who did this.",

"Nope. Looks like a stolen car. Plates don't match, and there's no registration in the vehicle."

I watched the Volvo do its aerial ballet for a while. Then, gradually, the gusher tapered off, along with the roar, and the car floated gently to earth again. Now it was very quiet, except for the gurgle of water pouring down the storm drains — and out the front of my shop. Bits and pieces of my stock floated slowly by.

Suddenly, I realized I had seen the Volvo before.

It was Perri's first car, the one she'd been driving the first time I'd ever seen her, when she'd come into the shop with Monica. She'd been proud of that car, bought with money from her first outside job. And she'd left it in Kentfield when she finally fled Gerald's landscaped penitentiary.

Gerald. It was sickening to realize he'd chosen to escalate our conflict. I'd never taken him for a thug. But, then, he'd never taken me for a knock-out artist. I stood there, holding on, trying to figure my next move, when something bumped my legs.

I reached down and picked up a dripping piece of cherrywood.

I didn't tell the police who owned the Volvo. Or about the state of my relationship with Gerald Williamson. By eleven, the car had been towed and a new hydrant bolted onto the water main. Gert was busy sifting through the remains and working with the salvage company on an inventory. I let them all get on with their business and drove across to the city. Perri was just finishing a class at the Art Academy when I found her.

She tried to get past me, but I grabbed her arm. "We're talking." She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

didn't argue, but she was white with fury by the time we found a bench in the little park behind the school. Then she took the first shot.

"I'm not sure I want to see you again. Violence was the reason I left Gerald. I won't stand for it. Not from you, not from anybody."

"Your husband paid me a return call last night." Then I told her about the Volvo and how he had probably hired someone to do a job on my business. She showed disgust, but no surprise. She knew perfectly well what Gerald was capable of.

"You'll go to the police," she said when I finished. "I'll identify the car."

"No police."

She caught on right away, and her eyes flashed. "So what's the next move, Russ? Bomb his house? Have him shot?"

"He started this."

"And I thought you were sensible enough and man enough not to let him drag you down to his level."

"I am, and I won't. But don't you understand? What Gerald did has nothing to do with me, not personally. Last night was a statement. He might have ruined my shop, but you're the real target. I'm just a symbol."

"Of what?" She said it scornfully, but I knew she was listening.

"Of you. Your independence, of the fact he's lost control of a person he was sure of. Of the fact that, sooner or later, he'll lose his child too. A man like Gerald can't stand that kind of threat. So he's shown what he'll do if you don't give Monica up."

Her face turned anguished, showing lines I'd never noticed before. "But you're the problem! He's never liked you, and it makes him crazy."

"And it'll be the same with the next man! God knows what he'll do if you decide to get married again. Control's all he cares about. And he'll keep you in line so long as he has your daughter. You know it's true! He's just about split us up, hasn't he? Hasn't he!"

She nodded yes, tear pooling in her eyes. I felt a burst of exhileration. I was making her see things my way.

"The thing is to stop him. You've got to get Monica back."

"But the court—"

"By the time you go through the whole thing, it'll be September. He'll have had her the whole summer, talking about you, poisoning her. And then he'll find a way to keep you from ever seeing Monica again." I shook my head. "The courts are for when you have her. Then your testimony about the car might do some good."

"How?" I could barely hear her.

"You leave that to me. I'll have her back at your place Saturday afternoon."

"Tomorrow...." Her voice trailed, and I saw the conflict raging inside her. It was the desire of a civilized person to conduct herself according to the law, against the overwhelming instinct a mother has to cradle and protect her child. In the end, the mother won, as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'd known it would. She agreed to let me handle things.

"Just tell me something before you go." Perri looked very tired, very old.

"What?"

"It's not just because you want to hurt Gerald, is it? It's not just revenge."

"No," I said. I think we both knew I was lying.

Finding out Monica's plans for Saturday took one phone call. She sounded cool at first, but my apology put her at ease. "Your Dad's all right, isn't he?"

"Well ... He does have a black eye." Then she giggled and told me Gerald was taking her with some friends to an amusement park called Great USA.

"Sounds like fun. What's your favorite ride down there?"

"The Monster Wave. You know, the roller coaster with the upside-down loop?"

"I think so."

"I bet my friend Lorrie I could ride it ten times in a row."

I told her to ride it once for me, then made her promise not to tell her father I called. After she hung up, I lay down on my couch and made my plans. Gerald had thought to hurt what I loved most, but I would cut him off from his future. It would be a kind of death, vengeance for the death he'd made me suffer.

The Corsican box was on the coffee table with its top flipped open. I could see myself in the mirror. Suddenly I realized that, in a way, the *voceru* beneath it had incited me to a form of the old vendetta. Rose McCandless would have said so. So would her mother.

I wondered if Jimmy McCandless had seen himself in the box when he'd plotted his next move against the rival landowners. Had he convinced himself he would strike back because of honor, to right a wrong? Or had he been caught in the flow of larger, incomprehensible forces? The *voceratrice* who'd composed the verses knew. So had the artisan who had done the marquetry on the top.

My windows were open, and I could hear distant sirens rising in mournful wisps up from the flatlands. After a time, a gust of wind tore back the curtains and blew the top of the Corsican box shut.

I'd been dozing. I sat up, wide-eyes, heart hammering. Then I picked up the box and saw a face in the grain of the wood even more clearly than I'd seen it the first time. It was a different face.

My face. But I didn't care. The spirit of the wood was indeed my jailer. And, like a good jailer, it would take care of me and help me do what I needed to do.

Great USA was very peaceful when I wandered in early the next morning. I could smell fresh popcorn and see kids who worked the refreshment stands bringing in cups and cans of syrup.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They worked slowly, knowing that in another hour the place would be a madhouse. This was the best time of day for them.

I found the Monster Wave and decided to give it a try while I waited for Monica. The operator loaded me in and snapped a padded shoulder harness over my backpack. Then the cars rocketed out of the launch chute, and I could feel the corners of the Corsican box digging into my back until we went through the loop. Then it was up the tower, and then a gravity-assisted backward trip through the loop again and finally into the chute. I staggered off with the rest of the passengers and saw I could grab Monica on the ramp outside the safety gate. Everyone had to get off and line up again on the other side if they wanted to ride again. Monica wanted to ride ten times. I'd have my chance.

I bought a hot dog and ate it. The park was getting crowded. I rode the Monster Wave again, this time with my eyes closed, so that I felt I was floating during the middle of the loop while the kids behind and in front of me screamed their heads off.

On my way down the ramp I saw Monica. She was with three or four of her friends, looking excited and happy. Gerald was behind them in white tennis togs and dark glasses. He looked resigned to a long and boring day. After the girls got in line he went off, and I took my position at the end of the ramp, watching as the operator loaded them into the cars. The motors whined, and then the cars went through the loop, up to the tower — hanging there a moment as though they might be stuck — and back to earth again. Kids came off the ramp wide-eyed, chattering to their friends.

Monica stopped dead when she spotted me. Then she told her friends to save her a place in line.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. She looked just like Perri did when she was mad. I could feel the backpack's straps dig into my shoulders, as though the box had suddenly tripled in weight.

"Your mom sent me." The lie was easy. "She's sick."

"Sick? Daddy didn't say anything."

"Maybe he didn't want you to know." She considered this. "She needs you, honey. It tears her up that she can't see you. In fact, I think that's really what's not making her feel so good."

"Maybe Daddy'll let me see her tomorrow."

"Honey, you know I wouldn't have come here to find you unless it was really serious. We can be at your Ma's place in half an hour."

"But I can't just leave without telling Daddy—"

"No!" Her eyes grew wide. "He wouldn't let you go with me. You know that. You tell your friends to tell your dad where you've gone. But make them wait fifteen minutes."

She looked at me with a pitiful ex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pression, and I knew she'd do anything if I'd just let her off the hook now.

But I said, "You love your mother, don't you?"

She took a deep breath. "Okay. I'll be right back."

The I saw Gerald. He had a beer and some popcorn and he stared at me with absolute disbelief that quickly turned to fury. The popcorn and the beer hit the ground. I grabbed Monica's hand before he had a chance to open his mouth.

"Come on!" We pushed onto the platform just as the cars left the chute. I lifted her over the barrier. The operator yelled, but we'd be gone before he could do anything.

I hadn't counted on Gerald being so fast. He hit me from behind just as I put Monica onto the other side of the platform. Then I turned to face him, knowing that this is what I'd wanted all along. He lunged at me, and we both hit the track, where I could feel the vibration of the cars — which had just climbed the tower — come off the rails. He swung at me and missed, and I laughed. There was nothing he could do to me, nothing at all, and he knew it.

Then he went for my throat, knocking me against the edge of the platform. And I heard the mirror inside my box break. The sound made me a madman: I kicked both feet together, caught him squarely in the chest. Gerald grunted in surprise and hit the opposite lip of the platform with the back of his head.

The cars were back at the top of the loop. Everyone was frozen with horror. I saw the operator struggling at the control board to activate the emergency braking system, but from his panicked expression I knew they weren't working right. Gerald was out cold. All I had to do was step up and I'd be safe, with better vengeance than I'd ever dreamed. In the buzzing of the car wheels I could hear the *voceratrice* cursing him for what he'd done. The spirit of the wood was going to capture him forever.

But it was my face in the box. I would be the one to suffer from his death. And the next person to have the box would see me caught in it and tell himself it was all an illusion, a trick of nature.

The mirror glass rattled as I crossed the track. Kids were screaming — those on the platform who could see what was going to happen, and those aboard the ride were facing the wrong way and enjoying the last of their safe terror. Never again will I be as strong as I was at that moment. The seams in his tennis shirt started to rip, but I arched my back and got the last foot-pound of strength from my legs and upper arms.

Gerald's shoes grazed the side of the cars as they roared past us.

Great USA's security people kept us for almost two hours while we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stonewalled and gave more or less similar stories. He was the jealous husband, me the new boyfriend. They opened my pack, disappointed, I think, not to find a bomb. The box with the broken mirror was a gift for the girl, I explained. Gerald had freaked when he saw me trying to give it to his daughter.

Both of us declined to press charges. So finally the frustrated park officials let us go, after banning us for the rest of the year. Monica and her friends got free passes on the way out, however. I had a feeling I would not be seeing her for a long time.

On the way home, I stopped at the glass company for another mirror. I installed it back at my house, taking care not to look at the *voceru*, or at the top. Even so, the box seemed to call to me, telling me softly that now I had learned about its powers I could control them. I didn't fall for it. If there was power here, it was more that I could handle. I'd been lucky. Jimmy McCandless, who'd only wanted to grow some grapes up in Sonoma, had not. Vengeance belonged to one who had made the box, the one who had given it. Not to the one who possessed it.

I packed it very carefully in styrofoam peanuts and sent it, UPS, to Mr. Gerald Williamson, Kentfield, California.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This powerful story about a reversal in time is from an Australian writer who tells us that he was born in 1944 in Melbourne and has worked as an editor and journalist. He has had two books published in the U. S., SORCERERS' WORLD (1970), Signet) and DREAMING DRAGONS (1980, Pocket).

Coming Back

BY

DAMIEN BRODERICK

Yes, by now he admits that Jennifer is not deliberately driving him crazy. Quit laying it on her, Rostow chides himself. His Bastilled lunacy is self-evidently self-inflicted. There can be no doubt, as Alice had always insisted, that his is a personality gruesomely at risk, pumping through spasms of mania and depression, elation and reproach. As he glances up, the bulwarks of censure shear free of their hinges. The three coil techs, finishing up, share his appreciation with ogles and grins.

Descending the worn rubber treads of the catwalk, its nonmagnetic structure faintly creaking and spronging in ludicrous counterpoint, Jennifer's legs are golden with undepilated summer hairs. He will certainly lose his reason. It is her innocent, unconscious hauteur which propels Rostow's intolerable aspirations.

Who would believe that less than three weeks ago, governed by hard liquor and soft drugs, his hands had crept like pussycats over those shins, pounced past her knees to her thighs and beyond, while all the while dextrous Auberon Mountbatten Singh, D. Sc., coolly worked at the far end of her torso with mysterious expertise, soothing her brow, the edges of her jaw, the latent weakness at her throat, the revealed swell of her breasts? Even at this moment Rostow can scarcely credit his role in that maniacal and tasteless contest. Was it a contest? As she steps from the catwalk to her computer terminal, Rostow groans at an ambiguity only he perceives.

If even once she took stock, fixed him with, say, a single killing glance of rebuke and rejection ... that would put an end to it. He might flail himself definitively and be done. Instead, she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

moves with languid competence in his marginal survival spaces like a neutrino beam wafting through a mountain of solid lead.

"Hi," she offers, settling herself in a molded seat. Her gaze penetrates him for an instant, moving after a beat to her keyboard. "Stan's on his way with the entire entourage. I spied."

"Jambo," says Rostow. It's all there, bolted into his larynx. Dutifully he runs the coded sequence of knobs and toggles which shunts the system from Latent to Standby. He nods to the departing technicians. There is a Parkinsonian tremor in his stupid fingers. "Pouring spirits down their throats, I guess. Softening them up."

Neat square indicators simmer vividly as the control instrumentation, swift bleats from his console to hers and back, patch into readiness. "This little number should sober them," she observes. "'Jambo'?"

"Swahili for 'Hello, sailor.'" A thread of mush in his voice and his brain tells his ear that the inflection was wrong. I blow it. Every time I blew it. With a mental fist he clouts his forehead. There is no time for limping second guesses. Stan Donaldson's abrasive voice precedes the man by half a second as the door swings wide for the expensive feet of the Board of Directors.

"We acquired it from Princeton, Senator," the department head is saying. "ERDA paid out a quarter of a billion dollars for a Tokamak Fusion Test Reactor that was obsoleted overnight when Sandia secured sustained fusion by inertial confinement."

It seems to Rostow, squinting from the side of his eye and jittery with alarm, that this approach is a mistake. The senator is notorious for his loathing of costly obsolescence. Uh-huh. Buonacelli halts in midstride, pokes a finger into Donaldson's chubby chest. "Another sonofabitch Ivy League boondoggle. By the Lord, that's the kind of crap I won't abide."

Donaldson stands his ground. His own rasp melodic after the senator's gravel hurtling from a tip-truck.

"Their blunder was our good fortune, sir," he says. "They were going to haul off the toroidal coils for recycling, but I managed to have them diverted to this laboratory. Everything is surplus or off-the-shelf. It made for a considerable saving."

Somewhat mollified, Buonacelli pushes forward to loom over Jennifer Barton's PDP-11/70 supervisor terminal, his minnows in attendance. "I'm still goddamned if I know what your magnets are for. Come straight out with it, man. The trustees won't be slow to scrap any project that smacks of self-indulgent tinkering." The set of his agribiz frame shows approval of Jennifer at least. "Convince us, and fast. This is the third department we've been dragged through today, and my feet are killing me."

"Miss Barton, could you fetch the senator a chair?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Incredulous on her behalf, Rostow burns. Buonacelli holds the woman's biceps as she rises. "That's fine, honey, I'll stand." An arm goes around her shoulders in a friendly squeeze nobody in his right mind could construe as avuncular. Eddie Rostow damages his tooth enamel. "Don't bother buttering me up, Dr. Donaldson. Let's get straight to the meat. What does this pile of junk do? Why do you deserve a couple more megabucks?"

Rostow's chagrin buckles to delight as Stan's moist, unhealthy jowls darken. No doubt this will be the third or fourth time Donaldson has tried to explain the advanced-wave mirror to the accountants. Probably, Eddie decides, Buonacelli is just baiting him. Maybe the old bastard knows zilch about high-energy physics, but he's nobody's fool.

There again, it would serve Donaldson right if they haven't followed a word he's been saying. The man revels in pretentious jargon. Rostow hears a scurry of furry feet in the cardboard box near his own, cranes his neck, breaks up in silent mirth. The white bunny rabbit in the box is making its own critical observations. Cottontail high, it's dropping a stream of dry pellets into the shredded lettuce that litters the box.

Florid, Stan has decided to simplify his spiel. He's saying: "A totally new branch of technology, gentlemen, Perhaps my previous remarks were overly technical."

"New like Princeton?"

"New like Sandia," the professor says, grasping thankfully at the straight line. "Yet thoroughly rooted in classical theory. What we have here, gentlemen, is the answer to a puzzle provoked by James Clerk Maxwell more than a century ago. Maxwell," he glosses, "was the genius who first showed that electricity and magnetism were one and the same. His equations are the basis of all electronic technology."

"For history we fund historians," one of the committee says coldly, currying favor, and recoils slightly when Buonacelli growls.

Irritated and emboldened, the great physicist states loftily: "Physics is precisely the accumulated history of great physicists. My point, Senator, is that Maxwell's equations for electromagnetic wave motion have two sets of solutions. One set describes what we term *retarded* waves, where fluctuations are broadcast outward due to the acceleration of a charged particle. Radio waves from a transmitter are retarded waves, akin to the ripples from a stone dropped in a pond."

Rostow monitors surges of power in the system, holding it in equilibrium. He seeks Jennifer Barton's eye, hoping for a shared long-suffering grimace, but her attention is directed to the listening senator.

Donaldson is creeping into pomposity again. "The other solutions, equally valid in theoretical terms, we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

call *advanced* waves. Until now they have never been detected, let alone utilized."

"Radio waves get drawn back into a transmitter?" Buonacelli poses acutely, puzzled.

"Exactly." Donaldson rewards him with a satisfied pout. "Advanced waves converge to a point. Another way of looking at it is to say that they travel backwards in time. They put time into reverse. Normally, for complex reasons, the two sets of waves interfere, yielding no more than the retarded component. What I've done here with this equipment—"

Unnoticed, Eddie Rostow sits bolt upright and his face distorts in a throttled shriek. What *you've* done, you thieving sonofabitch?

But Buonacelli's scandalized roar has filled the lab. Suddenly it is obvious that indeed he had not grasped the earlier explanations. "Who in hell do you think you are, Professor — H. G. Wells? Don't you ever learn? How dare you stand there and shamelessly tell us you've been spending the university's endowment on a *time* machine? Credit me with the sense I was born with."

As Rostow spins in his chair, the dignitaries are stomping toward the door. Before Donaldson finds words, Jennifer Barton has magically slipped into Buonacelli's path. "Surely you're not leaving yet, Senator? Won't you at least wait for the demonstrations we've prepared for you?" She blinks as if something is in her eye.

"Harrumph!" Buonacelli lifts her hands in his beefy paws. "I don't know how they've taken you in, my dear. Never trust a scientist. If they're not lunatics, they're swindlers. Either way, it's a waste of good tax revenue."

"Why, Senator! I'm a scientist myself."

He releases one hand, strokes his jaw. "My apologies, dear lady. To tell the truth, my eldest son is a chemist at Dow." Gallantly he bows, retaining one of her hands. "Very well, gentlemen. To please this charming lady, let's take a look at the professor's so-called demonstration."

Wincing, Rostow spins quickly back to his station. He knows he'll be the butt of Stan's fuming humiliation the moment the directors are on their way. Why do I put up with it?

Tersely, the professor tells Buonacelli, "You may examine this equipment thoroughly." He leads them to the mirror chamber buried between gigantic doughnut-shaped magnets, slides open the heavy hatch. With heavy sarcasm he says, "Assure yourselves it's quite empty. There are no hidden trapdoors or disappearing rabbits." Rostow swallows a snigger, his eye on the white bunny munching in its box between his feet. Poor little beast, he thinks an instant later. I hate that part of it. But it's going to rock Buonacelli on his heels and open his wallet.

"Advanced waves are generated in every molecular interaction. Within

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these confines they are reflected almost totally. The crystalline surface of the chamber constitutes an array of laser-like amplifiers which augment the advanced-wave component." My idea, Eddie Rostow wants to shout. Without that you'd have a big magnetic field going absolutely nowhere. But whose name will go on the paper? He says nothing. Donaldson puts his head inside the chamber. Dully, as he twists back and forth, his muffled voice states: "As you see, it's perfectly safe at the moment." An almost irrestible impulse floods Rostow. Regretfully, he pulls his finger back from the power switches.

"Okay," growls Buonacelli, "it's empty. So?"

Jennifer Barton leaves her terminal and returns with a flask of boiling water in one hand and a tray of ice cubes in the other.

"This will be simple but graphic, Senator," she says. It is Stan's notion of theatrics to have her fetch the props. "As you can see, this water is very hot. Would you care to dip in your pinky to test it, sir?"

"Thank you, honey, but I guess I recognize hot water when I see it."

A crony adds, unnecessarily, "You've been in plenty of it in your time." Everyone laughs ingratiatingly. Jenny drops two large ice cubes into the flask, places it inside the chamber. She goes at once to her terminal, and her features blank out in the inert Zen concentration of perfect egoless programming. The assembled company stare foolishly at the sight of two ice cubes slowly dissolving. Donaldson dogs the hatch. An enhanced but rudimentary image of the interior comes to life on an adjacent TV screen. It shows two ice cubes slowly dissolving.

"Ideally," the professor says, fists clenched at his sides, "the chamber would be absolutely shielded. We've sacrificed some signal purity so you can see what's going on inside. The process will still work reasonably well. Is the system on-line, Eddie?"

"Yeah." Rostow's own palms are wet. The whole performance is premature. Five successful tests and two fails. Donaldson's a yo-yo, bobbing from an obsession for publicity at any cost through close-mouthed paranoia and back. It'd almost be nice if the damned thing blew out. Bite your tongue. It's my baby. Go, go.

"Well, don't just sit there."

"Right, Stan," says Rostow through his teeth, and smashes the toggle closed.

There is no new sound, no deep shuddering hum or rising whine. Current in the magnetic coils goes to fifty thousand amps, and there is a faint creaking as monstrously thick non-magnetic steel structural members crave one another's company in the embrace of the stupendous field. Sometimes, the lights dimmed, Rostow has seen phantom bars of pale light crossing his line of sight. Field strengths of this magnitude can screw

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with the visual cortex. Or maybe the magnets bend cosmic radiation through the soft tissues of his eyeballs and brain, nibbling tiny explosions of pseudolight in his synapses. It isn't happening now. Everyone stares at the TV monitor, waiting for something apocalyptic. Caught by the mood, Rostow abandons his console and steals across to join them.

"I'm still waiting," Buonacelli barks.

"Watch the ice cubes, Senator," Jennifer tells him.

"Dear God." It is one of the accountants who first grasps what is happening. "The bastards are getting bigger!"

"Just so," Donaldson says, loosening his fists. "The basic conservation law: heat can't pass from a cold object to a hot one. But time inside the mirror is now running backwards, gentlemen, for all practical purposes. Advanced Maxwell radiation, amplified by the lasing action, is converging on the flask. The Second Law of Thermodynamics is repealed."

Rostow's body thumps to his pulse. Steam is rising once more from the flask. A pair of unblemished cubes jounce at the surface of the boiling water.

"Fantastic," Buonacelli groans. "I take it all back. Dr. Donaldson, this is the wonder of the age."

"You have yet to witness the more dramatic part of our demonstration." Turning abruptly, the professor stumbles into Rostow. "Wouldn't it be better if you were at your console, Eddie? Please power the system down immediately and put it on Standby. Where's that animal?"

Rostow chews at part of his face. "I'll get him for you." He slouches in his seat, runs the current down, feels in the box with his left hand for the bunny. Helplessly he glances at Jennifer Barton. She is watching him. Fingers tight around the bunny's ears, he hoists it from the box and feels acid in his stomach as he identifies the flash of emotion in her face.

Taking the bunny, Donaldson suggests: "Remove the flask and then stand by for my mark." Rostow seethes, but welcomes the distraction. Behind him the bunny squeals. Nothing wrong with its memory at any rate. There's a meaty thunk. When he turns back with the remelted cubes, Rostow finds the professor marching toward him with the bunny's bloody, guillotined corpse in a sterile glass dish. One of the accountants, no great white hunter, is averting squeamish eyes. Buonacelli's are narrowed in wild surmise.

Resurrection is at once prosaic, electrifying, impossible to comprehend. On the raster-crossed black and white monitor, the bunny's grainy sopping fur lightens as untold trillions of randomly bustling molecules reverse their paths. As the flow staunches, its poor partitioned head rolls upward from the glass bowl and fits itself seam-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lessly to its unmarked neck. Prestidigitation. The bunny blinks spasmodically, slow lids snapping upward, wiggles his ass, and disgorges a strip of unchewed lettuce. The lab thunders crazily with applause.

"By the Lord, you're a genius!" Hue has drained from Buonacelli's seamed features; it surges back, as he beats Donaldson's shoulders. "Reviving the dead...." He pauses and adds slowly, with avaracious appetite: "A man could live forever."

"I doubt it," Rostow tell him. "We can put people back together, and heal wounds. But unfortunately it won't help those who die of natural causes."

"Rejuvenate them!"

"It'll rub out your memory."

"Not your financial holdings, by God." The senator flexes his fingers, thickened by incipient arthritis. "Plenty of memories I could happily live without. You could brief yourself — leave notes, tapes...."

"Sorry. Reversed time passes at the conventional rate. Do you want to spend forty years in solitary confinement? Besides, even the immensely rich couldn't run this machine nonstop for that long."

Donaldson is nodding his agreement, until it occurs to him that he's no longer the center of attention. "I did ask you to stay at your console, Eddie. Miss Barton, thank you, that will be all today." With smiles all around, he ushers the committeemen away from the mirror into a cozy space of his own contriving. Eddie Rostow watches them troop toward the door. They remain in shock, their several minds no doubt working like maniacs as each tries to figure himself in and the rest out. "Truly astounding," one says as the door closes.

Rostow covers his face. In the huge empty lab he hears Jennifer Barton rise from her seat. He opens his fingers for a peek. She is regarding him across her deactivated terminal; he cannot read her expression with certainty. Once more he covers his eyes and listens to the tap of her shoes, the click of her exit. Wistfully he sniffs the air for a trace of her scent, more natural pheromone than applied cosmetic. On the monitor screen, the bunny is scratching at the walls of the mirror chamber. Poor little beast. Dazed by anger, lust, remorse and sympathy, Rostow strides to the chamber and plucks the bunny to freedom and mortality.

A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

"Cretin," he mouths, dropping the rabbit and slamming the hatch. He runs toward the console, clutching his eyes, and barks his shin on the back of his chair.

Nothing explodes. When his vision clears he scans the bank of square lights on the system he had left running at full power without computer supervision. Christ Almighty, we need a fail-safe on that. Who'd expect anyone to be so dumb? Shuddering, he runs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through the step-down with scrupulous attention to detail, double-checking every item.

As he finishes, he notes the bunny lumping near his numb toes, trying to get back into its box. The stupid bastard is hungry again. He heaves it in.

The afternoon is only half done. This is insane. Did Roentgen finish off his full day's work after the first exhibition of X-rays? Surely Watson and Crick didn't quietly mop up the lab after they'd confirmed the DNA helix. I'll take myself off and tie one on, he decides. I'll get drunk as a skunk. He'd done just that after the first successful trial of the advanced-wave mirror: by himself, bound to secrecy by his nervous department head, he'd sat in a downtown bar and poured bourbon into his belly until the trembling urge to howl with joy dopplered into a morose blur. And paid for it next day. Oh, no, not that again. I'll march down to Jennifer's room and lay it all out for her. Invite her to a movie, a plate of Fricassé de Poulet at Chez Marius and a bottle or two of Riesling. We'll get smashed together, bemoan Donaldson's bastardry; hell we'll leave Donaldson out of it; we'll go to her apartment and screw our tiny pink asses off.

His hand had been all the way up her skirt, and the next day she'd acted as if nothing had ever passed between them. Did goddamned Auberon Mountbatten Singh have his evil Anglo-Indian way with her that night, rotating through ingenious positions? It doesn't bear thinking about.

For a moment, to his horror, Rostow finds himself regretting his divorce. Worse, he finds his baffled free-floating lust drifting in the direction of the image of his ex-wife. Swiftly, before he damages his brain beyond repair, he puts a stop to that

With effort he levers up from the dead console and mooches to the foot of the catwalk, leaning on its handrail. I have to stop brooding about Jennifer. I could have killed myself shoving my hand into the powered mirror, through the temporal interface. I do not interest her strangely. Undoubtedly only fantastic self-restraint prevented her from smashing my impertinent jaw with her knee. My god, how can I look her in the eye?

This kind of maundering unreels through Rostow's head until he is so bored with it that he turns back to check the data for tomorrow's log of tests. Glancing at the wall clock, he sees that he's wasted half an hour in useless self-laceration. Maybe, after all, he should simply run out the door, burst into her office, and screw her until the sweat pops from her admiring brow. Oh my God. He drags a heavy battered mathematical cookbook from the bench where the bunny rabbit was murdered and resigns himself to the honorable discharge of his employment. A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Cretin," he mouths, dropping the rabbit and slamming the hatch. He runs toward the console, clutching his eyes, and barks his shins on the back of his chair.

Nothing explodes. A startled, unconvinced element in his mind asks itself: Hasn't this all happened before?

He notes the bunny lumping near his numb toes trying to get back into its box. The stupid bastard is—

Oh Jesus. A small disjointed part of him watches the wind-up golem, as detached as the bunny's head after its sacrifice. This isn't *deja vu*. It's too sustained. I'll take myself off and tie one on, he decides. I'll get drunk as a skunk. Oh my God, I'm tracking through the same temporal sequence twice. But that's truly insane, delusional. Time isn't repeating itself. I'm using the advanced-wave mirror system as a metaphor, at some profoundly cracked-up level of my unconscious. Didn't my dear sweet brilliant wife complain that I'm a cyclothymic personality, a marginal manic-depressive, obsessively driven to repeat my laments? I've careened into a rut. A conditioned habit of thought. Jennifer Barton is driving me nuts. I can't even see her in the same room without brooding on the same stupefying regrets and fantasies. I'll march down to Jennifer's room and lay it all out for her. Invite her to a movie, a plate of Fricassée de—

All his sensations are scrambled. The terror in his head clangs against the lugubrious mood of his hormones. I looked at the clock, he tells himself desperately, clutching for a falsifiable test. Sound scientific method. What did it say? 4:37? Last time round. He grips that single datum, while his mutinous corpse leans on the railing of the catwalk, one foot propped on a rubber tread. Glancing at the wall clock, he sees that he's wasted half an hour—

Oh God Almighty. 4:37. Exultation bursts in his mind, leaving his flesh to plod like lead. Hold it, that doesn't mean you haven't flipped your cranium. Everyone has a built-in clock. Three Major Biorhythms Ordain Your Fate, that sort of thing. He wants to giggle, but his chest and jaw don't respond to the wish. His frail flesh has resigned itself to the honorable discharge of his employment. A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

No! the small anarchic part screams silently. I can't stand it. It's happening again. I'm stuck in a loop of time. Wait, I can prove it. I dropped the rabbit. Any moment now I'll glance down and see it...

...trying to get back into its box. The stupid bastard is hungry again. He heaves it in—

Rostow tells himself: this is the third time round. Or is it? Were he in control of his programmed muscles, he would shudder. Maybe I've been caught in this loop for all eternity, or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at any rate long enough for random quantum variations in one part of my brain to set up an isolated observing subprogram. Jesus, how much pseudo-duration would that take? Ludwig Bolzmann's *Stossahlansatz* postulate: ordered particles spontaneously decay into chaos, but given enough interactions they can swirl together again into a new order, or even the old order. Suppose I'm at the bottom of a local fluctuation from unordered equilibrium. What's the Poincaré recurrence time for a human being and his lab? Say 10 to the 10th power raised to the 30th power. That's *absolutely* grotesque. The entire universe would have evaporated into dead cold soot. So I'm re-cycling. I stuck my mitt in the hatch and screwed up the mirror. I'm looping through the same 30 minutes forever, knowing exactly what's due next and unable to do anything about it. Maybe I'm not crazy — but I will be soon.

I'm a prisoner, Rostow realizes, in my own past.

For a moment, to his horror, he finds himself regretting his divorce. Worse, he finds—

Hold it, the isolated segment thinks. If I'm patched into the lasing system, the additional mass of my body is pushing the mirror into a singularity on an asymptotic curve, tending to the limit at 30-odd minutes duration. But Hawking has shown that quantum effects re-enter powerfully under such conditions. After all, Rostow debates with himself, they must, or I'd be unaware of what's happening. The human brain has crucial quantum-scale interactions. Haven't Popper and Eccles been arguing that case for years? So maybe I can break free of my prior actions. What's to stop me *deciding* to cross the room and pick up the flask from the bench where I put it?

Jenny, you bitch, he thinks, why are you doing this to me? Bitterly, he wanders to the bench and lifts the lukewarm flask of melted ice-cubes to his lips. It tastes terrible. He puts it down with revulsion, then picks it up once more and stares in amazment. I'm not thirsty. Something *made* me do that—

—the flask slips out of his fingers and shatters. The twin sectors of consciousness fuse.

Eddie Rostow goes stealthily to his console chair and lowers himself with infinite delicacy.

Aloud, he mutters: "I'm not out of it yet. Or am I? Is one change in the cause-and-effect sequence sufficient to take me off the loop?" Mellowing afternoon light slants across his fists from the barred skylight, a sympathetic doubling to the shadow from harsh white fluoros, and his voice echoes wanly. Rostow flushes. If Donaldson comes through that door to hear him mumbling to himself....

But that isn't on the agenda, is it? If anyone in the entire world has a certified lease on his own immediate future, it's Edward Theodore Rostow, doctoral candidate and imbecile. The spar-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kling impossible conjecture has come belatedly on tiptoes to smash him behind the ear. With a glad cry he leaps to his feet. "I can do anything! *Anything* I wish!"

I'm not trapped. I thought I was a prisoner, but I'm the first man in history to be genuinely liberated. Set free from consequences. Do it. If you don't like the results, scrub it on the next cycle and try again.

Rostow grabs up paper and calculator, scrawls figures. Start by establishing the exact parameters. See if the loop is decaying or elongating. It's aggravating, but he rounds out the cycle with his eyes clamped to the clock. The bloody aura flashes a half-minute after the digital clock jumps to 4:37. With iron control he keeps hold of the rabbit and wrenches his head around as vision clears. Three minutes after four. His endocrine fluids are telling him to panic, sluggishly stuck in the original sequence. Rostow's excited mind shouts them down. Denying the inertia of previous events, he takes the wriggling bunny to his console and places it carefully in its cardboard home. A thirty-four minute loop, forsooth.

Considerable effort is required initially. Rostow's First Theorem, he thinks, grinning. Any action will continue to be repeated indefinitely unless a volitional force is applied to counter that action. Fortunately the energy necessary to alter intention and will is in the microvolt range. Yes. The brain is a quantum machine for making choices, once you understand that choice is possible.

He halts with his hand on the door latch. Think this through. Stan Donaldson, esteemed head of department and professor, is the last sonofabitch who deserves to know. Will I fall off the loop if I wander away from the mirror? Leaving the loop is suddenly a most undesirable prospect. Some obscure prompting dispels these trepidations. Rostow opens the door and enters the long colorless corridor.

Led by bombastic Donaldson, the Board of Directors is taking the stairs to the free hooch. Jennifer Barton's thick mane swirls as she shakes her head, freeing her arm from the senator's grip. On the bottom step she pivots and turns right, toward her small office in the Software Center. Not celebrating? Eddie shuts the lab door and pursues her down the corridor.

I can't tell her about it. She'd be obliged to call for the men in white. Up ahead, she slips into her office without looking in his direction. Arousal stirs in him, fecklessly.

Not truly believing it, he reminds himself: Anything is possible. There are no payoffs. The world's a stage, tra-la. "I'll just lay it on the line," he mutters seriously. A passing student blinks at him. With an inane giggle, Rostow nods. Loudly, in a crisp tone, he tells the student: "I'll ask her what the hell it is between us." "Oh," says the student, and walks on, swivelling his brows.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

High out of his gourd on freedom unchecked by restraint, Rostow zooms toward joy with the woman of his dreams. In a magical slalom on the vinyl tiles, he bursts through Jennifer Barton's door and thrusts his hands on the desk's edge. Her lab coat lies on a filing cabinet; she stands at her window, brushing her hair. "Tell me, for Christ's sake," Eddie barks before his vocabulary can freeze up, "what the hell it is between us."

His secret sweetheart narrows her eyes. With deflated, acute perception, Rostow surmises that perhaps he is not *her* secret sweetheart. "I hate it with the rabbit," she tells him, putting the brush in a drawer. "But it was a sensational *coup de théâtre*. Coming up for a drink?"

"Didn't you notice? I wasn't invited."

"Surely it was understood." She is being patient with him. Rostow closes the door at his back and sits on the desk. Stress is winding him tight. Has the stoned euphoria gone already?

"Jennifer," he says.

She waits. Then she rolls the caster-footed chair forward, sits before her impressive stacks of hard copy, and waits some more.

"Look. Jennifer, something went wrong with my upbringing. The only time I'm fluent is when I'm smashed, and then I turn into the maddened wolfman. So I don't go out very often. For example. Six months ago, after a horrible divorce, I ventured to a party without a keeper. Nobody tied me up or shoved a gag in my face. I failed conspicuously to recognize an old acquaintance, and then hectored him about the polarity of his sexual cravings. In the crudest possible terms. With no provocation, I noisily engaged a stern feminist on the matter of her tits, which I found noteworthy. I ended by shouting in a proprietorial manner from one end of the host's house to the other, at three in the morning, inviting young bearded people and their companions to drink up and depart swiftly, in what seemed to me a hearty and engaging fashion. When I got home I fell down in my own puke."

After a further silence, Jennifer lights a cigarette. "How horrible."

"Doubtless I'm a horrible person in every respect."

"That's not what I meant."

Rostow starts to yell, then lowers his voice in confusion. "I stumble over you sprawled on a fat bean-bag in the middle of a room of colleagues and strangers having your tits massaged by a swarthy blackamoor—"

She's on her feet. "Okay, sport. Enough. Out." Eddie is taken aback at the power of her extended arm as she hoists him off the desk. He thumps down heavily, barring the door with one leg.

"No, goddamn it. So I sit down beside you and toy with your wonderfully hairy leg. You smile and extend your limbs. I can't believe it. Up goes my little hand, hoppity-scamp—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Shut up, you creep."

For this, Rostow is utterly unprepared. He gapes.

Jennifer refuses to lower her eyes. Blotches of color stand out on her cheekbones. "You're right, Rostow, you are a horrible person. Incredibly enough, I once found you rather piquant. Your crass behavior the other night might have been forgivable as whimsy." In authentic rage she clamps her teeth together and wrenches the door open. "Stay or go as you please." Then the room is vacant, and Rostow slumps on the desk with his guts spilling out of his wounds and his brain whirling into sawdust and aloes.

The bloody aura is a jolt from one awful dream to another. With iron control he keeps hold of the rabbit and wrenches his head around as vision clears. Three minutes after four. Yet the appalling encounter echoes like a double image, a triple image in fact. His chemistry overloads and he vomits uncontrollably. Finally sourness sweeps away hallucination; he totters to the console and runs the mirror system down to Latent.

Aghast, he tells himself: "Scrub it out. Make it didn't happen." Regressing to childhood. His mouth tastes repulsive; he wipes his lips on the back of his hand. I can't take much more of this, he thinks. The human frame wasn't meant to handle the strain of dual sets of information. It'd take a Zen roshi to cope with this weirdness. The bitch, the lousy bitch.

But it isn't Jennifer Barton's doing. Rostow is doomed by his oafishness. I've got to keep away from her. I'd shred myself into a million messy bits. It is clear, though, that he cannot cower forever in the lab with only a canonized rabbit for company. Enough, he tells himself. Out. The clock shows a quarter after four. Cyclic time is slipping away. Down the corridor, unharassed, Jennifer Barton is presumably finalizing her coiffure.

Rostow slams the door, running for the stairs. As he expects, Buonacelli and his claque are milling in the Senior Faculty Bar. Donaldson dispenses whiskies in their midst, jovial, exonerated, cautioning them all to reticence under the rubric of security.

"A wonderful experience, Dr., uh, Rostow?" says one of the directors, a pleasant administrator. Eddie turns convulsively. "I'm Harrison MacIntyre, Ford Foundation." The man holds out his hand. "No problems with funding," he smiles, "after today."

"Oh. Thank you. Not 'doctor,' I'm afraid. I've never had time to write anything up." Stan seems to be explaining how the advanced-wave project sprang fully armed from his professorial brow. Adrenalin begins a fresh surge. MacIntyre puts liquor into his hand and asks, "I've been wondering about that. Publication, I mean. Surely today wasn't your first trial with the equipment?"

"No. No, Harrison. Call me Eddie. We knew it was going to work. It's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been operational for some weeks." Across the russet carpet, Buonacelli is laughing boomingly. "The Nobel Prize for Physics, Stan," says the senator. "The Nobel Prize for Medicine," adds a beaming director. "Hot damn," cries another "they'll make it a hat trick and give you the Nobel Prize for Literature when your paper comes out."

Rostow scowls hideously. "Normally we would indeed have published by now, Harrison," he says loudly. "But after the tachyon fiasco, Professor Donaldson developed some misgivings about shooting his mouth off prematurely, you see." Faces turn. "You must remember, 1975 wasn't it? Every man and his beagle was hunting faster-than-light particles. The great physicist spied his chance at glory." The Ford Foundation man, scandalized, tries to hush him. Eddie drains his glass, gestures for another. "But the professor blew it. His tachyons were actually pickup calls from the Green Cab Company. They snuck in through his Faraday cage. Someone didn't check that out until after the press conference did we, Stan?"

Donaldson is peering at the half-full glass in Rostow's grasp; slowly, he allows his gaze to rise until he studies a point somewhere near Eddie's left ear. "Mr. Rostow," he says from the depths of his soul, "hired hands are rarely invited into this room. Those who gain that privilege generally comport themselves with civility and a due measure of deference. Those who have just been fired without a reference do not linger here under any circumstances. Get out of my sight."

Jennifer Barton arrives at that moment, smiling, hair lustrous. At the door she hesitates, scanning shocked faces. Their eyes meet. Her presence — oblivious of edited outrage, witness to new humiliation — sends Rostow into a frenzy. He throws down his glass and catches Donaldson by his lapels.

"I wish you wouldn't shout, Frogface," he says, every sinew on fire. "You astounding hypocrite," he says, jouncing the man back on his heels. "What's a Nobel Prize or two between hired hands?" he says, thumping Donaldson heavily in the breast. Two or three of the directors have come to their senses by now and grapple with Rostow, dragging him away from his gasping and empurpled victim. "It happens all the time, doesn't it?" Eddie squirms, kicking at targets of opportunity. "We poor bastards break our asses so some ludicrous discredited figurehead can whiz off to Stockholm to meet the king."

Even in his own ears, Rostow's outburst sounds thin, thin. Where righteousness should ring, only a stale peevishness lingers. Tears of anger and mortification star the pendant cut-glass lamps. He breaks free and pushes through business suits. Jennifer stares at him, off balance. "You don't want to stay with these vultures," he cries, seizing her arm. It seems that she studies his scarlet face for minutes of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

silence. With a minimal movement she dislodges his hand.

"Eddie," she says regretfully, "when are you going to grow up?"

Bitch. Bitch, bitch.

And the bloody aura. He is holding the rabbit, wrenching his head around to check the clock. This time the shock of recurrence is curiously attenuated, as if lunatic hostility sits better than misery with a physiology keyed to fright. Rostow's heart rattles, catches its beat; the pulse thunders in his neck and wrists. The rabbit struggles free. He moves with Tarquin's ravishing stride to the console, at a pitch of emotion. Icily he shuts down the mirror system. There are cracks in the concrete where the supports for the magnetic coils are embedded. A faint regular buzzing comes from the fluoros. His skin is crawling, as if each hair on his body is a nipple, erect and preternaturally sensitive. Gagging, he closes the door and paces remorselessly down the corridor.

Jennifer Barton stands on the bottom step of the carved stairs, deflecting Senator Buonacelli's horseplay. Rostow storms past them. "Hey, boy, that was a great show," cries the senator. "Why don't you and this little lady come up and join us in a drink?" Rostow hardly hears the man. His feet are at the ends of his legs. Jennifer's door is not locked. He leaves it wide for her. staring out into the afternoon light. Three tall blacks fake and run, dribbling a ball.

"Well, Jambo!" As Eddie faces her, Jennifer is closing the door, meeting him with an infectious smile. "It's taken you long enough to find my office, sailor."

"What?" he says, uncomprehending. He pushes her roughly back against the croweded desk and takes her thigh with cruel pressure. Speechless and instantly afraid, she repudiates his hand. He thrusts it higher and tugs at her underwear.

"Let's pick up where we left off," he informs her. An absolute chill pervades his flesh. Nothing had prepared him to expect this of himself. Everything he calls himself is outraged, shrunken in loathing at his own actions.

"Stop it," she says distantly. "You fucking asshole." Tactically her posture is not favorable; when she drives up her right knee, its bruising force is deflected from his leg. I can have whatever I want. The whole universe is a scourge slashing at my vulnerable back. Very well, let those be the rules. He imagines he is laughing. I have nothing to offer but fear itself. As she begins to scream and batter his neck, his cheek, his temple, he clouts her savagely into semiconsciousness. Oh Jesus, you can't be blamed for what happens during a nightmare. In the absence of causality, Fyodor, all things are permitted. She is bent backward, moving feebly. One of his hands clamps her mouth, hard against her teeth, the other unzips. I'm the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Primary Process Man, oh, wow. But he is so cold. There is no blood under his skin. Rostow batters at her thighs with his limp flesh. He slides to his knees. The edge of the desk furrows his nose.

"You," Jenny grunts. She is blank with detestation. Tenderly, she touches her skull. "You."

Eddie Rostow lurches upright. Swaying, exposed, he falls into the corridor. The same young student, returning, regards him with astonishment and abhorrence. The boy reaches out a hand, changes his mind and pelts away in search of aid. It is all a grainy picture show, a world-sized monitor screen. They'll fire him for this. Oh, sit, Jenny, you don't understand, I *love* you.

In fugue, Rostow pitches down the corridor.

The cleaver is lying where Donaldson left it on the bench, a ripple of bunny blood standing back from its surgical edge. Rostow's self-contempt has no bounds. As he lifts the blade, there is one final lucid thought. I'm an animal, he tells himself. We can't be trusted. The cleaver's handle slips in his sweating fingers. He tightens his grip and with a kind of concentration brings the thing in a whirling silvery arc into the tilted column of his neck. Shearing through the heavy sternomastoid muscle, in one blow it slashes the carotid artery, the internal jugular and the vagus nerve, before it's stopped by the banded cartilage of the trachea. He scarcely feels his flesh open: all pain is in the intolerable impact. A brilliant crimson jet spears and spatters, but Rostow fails to see it: he collapses in shock, and the fluid pulses out of his torpid body until he is dead.

His corpse lies cooling until half a minute after 4:37.

A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

Rostow screams.

There is nothing banal in this plunge upward into instantaneous rebirth. It is overwhelming. It is transcendental. It is a jack-hammer on Rostow's soul.

Like a thousand micrograms of White Lightning, life detonates every cell of his brain and body. He has been to hell, and died afterwards. Let me stay dead. Let me be dead.

Catharsis purges him of every thought. Eddie cradles the white rabbit in his arms and sobs his heart out.

At length he is sufficiently composed to reflect: I never cried when Alice left. Everything wise within me insisted that I should cry, but I turned my back. He realizes that he hasn't wept freely since he was a child. Dear Jesus, does it take this abomination to lance my constricted soul?

And his spirits do indeed soar. Without denying the reality of what he has done, his pettiness and spite and ignominy, he encompasses a mood of redemptive benediction. It brings a wide, silly grin to his mouth.

"Bunny rabbit," he declares, lofting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the animal high over his head, laughing as its big grubby hind feet thump the air, "ain't nobody been where we wuz, baby. Let me tell you, buster, I like this side a lot better."

Eddie feeds the rabbit a strip of lettuce and steps through the tedious details of shutdown. He meditates on his humbling and his bestiality, flinching at memory.

The frailty at his core yearns to interpret it all as a stress nightmare, an hallucination. Denial would be not merely futile and cowardly, it would betray what has been offered him. Rather piquant, eh? Holy shit. Still, it is a point of access. Eddie Rostow confesses to his worst self that he needs all the help he can get.

The next cycle brings swifter recovery. Rostow splashes tepid water from the flask into his face, dabbing at his reddened eyelids. Soon he must spend some time figuring how to replicate the loop condition after he gets off this one. Fertile conjectures multiply; he suppresses them for the moment. Nerving himself, he walks edgily to the Software Center, nodding companionably to the passing students. The directors have ascended to their solace. His knock is tentative.

Jennifer's smile startles him with its warmth. She lowers her hairbrush. "Well, hello, sailor."

Eddie stands in the doorway, drinking her unbruised face. Despite himself he flushes.

"Don't just loiter there with intent, man. You're the unsung hero of the moment. It was sensational." She frowns. "I hated it with the rabbit, though."

"Jennifer," he says in a rush, "I'm sorry about the party. You know."

"That. Yeah. You were rather blunt."

"You inspire the village idiot in me."

"Sailor, that's the sweetest thing anyone ever. Coming up to poach on the Professorial Entertainment Allowance Fund?"

Eddie melts disgustingly within, wallowing in amnesty. "I happen to know a place."

"You've got a fifth of Jack Daniels squirreled in your locker."

"I've always admired your mind. Passionately."

"That wasn't the part you molested in public."

"I am, " he tells her, "truly sorry." Her hair flows in his fingers and he puts his face against hers for a moment. Jenny touches his hand.

"While we dally," she tells him, "Stan is up there screwing you."

"No argument. He's like that. All scientists are lunatics and swindlers. I intend to fight. More to the point, are you screwing Dr. Singh? Oh Christ, don't answer that."

"I will not, it's none of your business. For God's sake, don't get snotty. Here, let me help you off with your—"

"Shouldn't we shut the door?"

"Kick it, you're closer. Why did it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

take you so long to get here?"

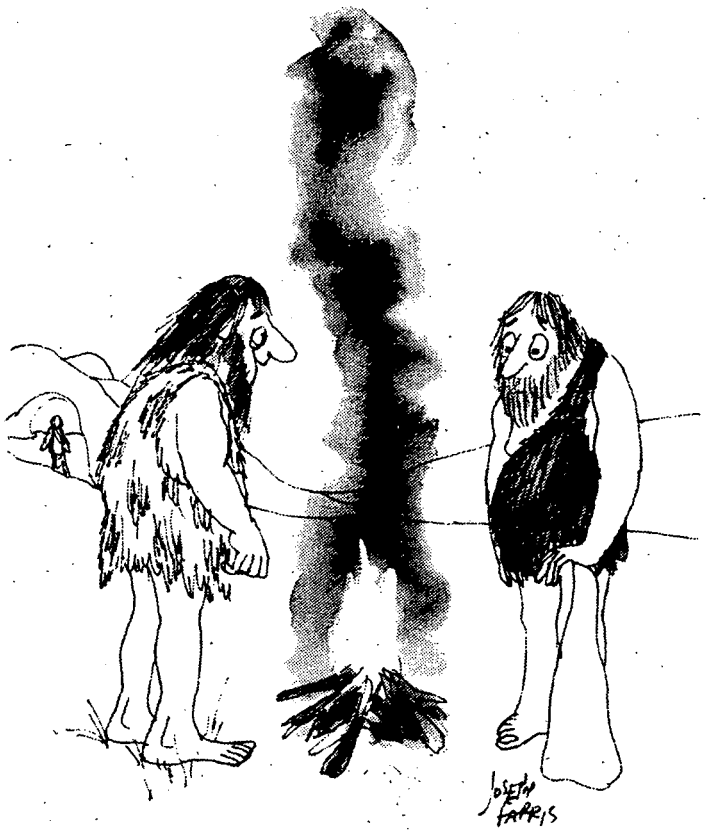
"Don't ask."

"Hmm. You know, I thought you were going to throw a tantrum in the lab."

Eddie tries to keep his tone light. "Upon my soul, Miss Barton, that'd be no way for a besotted genius to contest his rights." Shortly he asks: "Won't the printouts get runkled?"

"There's more in the computer, you fool."

On the next loop, abandoning his dazed inertia for an instant, Eddie glances at Jennifer's wrist watch and ensures that the flash comes as the flash comes as the flash comes.

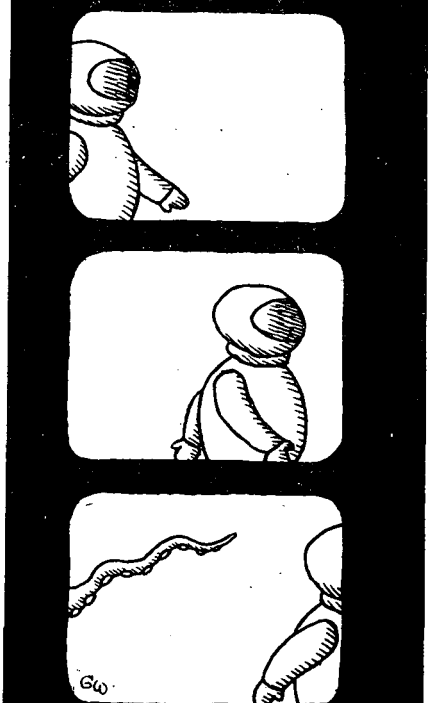


"I just invented it and I'm thinking of calling it 'wheel'. What do you think?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

KEVIN IN COMPUTERLAND

There is this Walt Disney formula, you see. There are the villains, who are up to no good. They are never really awful, usually not even murderous. Just nefarious, as are their doings. And in their way are some nice people — some *very* nice people. So nice that they have no character whatsoever.

Being in the villains' way leads to trouble for the nice, bland people. And to their assistance come the fantasy creatures that are the *raison d'etre* for whatever Disney film we happen to be talking about ... dear little people, dear little animals, dear little cars, fairy godmothers, talking mice appear out of the woodwork at the drop of a flubber.

In *Tron*, it's dear little computer programs, personified in a through-the-terminal-screen world "inside" a computer. The villains are a Master Control out to enslave every program and system in the world, and its human partner, the senior executive of a huge computer corporation.

In their way are three very nice people. One is Kevin Flynn, an ex-corporation employee — ex- because the senior exec a while back had stolen some hot videogame ideas from him. Alan is a current employee who has developed a program that threatens the villains' nefariousness. And then there's a girl who is there mainly because she's a girl, since she doesn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have much else to do.

Kevin is zapped by Master Control and becomes a program person in the computer world, where he meets Tron, Alan's program who looks just like him. Later an analog for the lady shows up there, too, for no particular reason.

They escape from Master Control's control, and there are chases and pursuits through the world of the computer, using such modes of travel as light cycles and a solar sailor, as the trusty trio attempts to dig up the data that will prove that Kevin's ideas had been stolen by the senior exec; he had randomized it within the system where it is lost but retrievable.

Despite its ultra-high tech milieu, *Tron* is a fantasy, and not science fiction; the fantasy elements — the program people and the computer world — haven't an iota of the speculative scientific rationalization that goes to make s/f. This wouldn't matter if it were good fantasy, but it's not; it's the childish type of whimsy you'd expect from the Disney studios.

A few decades back, there was a spate of children's books with names such as *Alice in Orchestralia*, wherein the juvenile protagonists would visit whimsical worlds inhabited by animated musical instruments or sentient numbers. I got something of the same feeling from *Tron*; I was no more convinced of the reality of its computer world than I was of that of Orchestralia. They are both allegorical whimsy.

This has as much to do with the style as the content. Much has been made of *Tron's* revolutionary technique, and the computer world at first glance is quite extraordinary, all glowing grids and blocks and extensions of video game visuals. Certainly the integration of live actors and animated environment is well beyond anything that's been done before.

But with all this, again, I was no more convinced that what I saw was real than I am that what I see on a video game screen is real; my eye may have been convinced — everything on the screen jelled visually — but my mind simply wasn't. We aren't being shown the variation on reality which is true fantasy (a dragon flying around a mountain), but a totally created world which has nothing to do with reality as we know it. And despite the skillfully integrated elements of reality (the actors), the effects (i.e. the animation) are all, and as I've often pointed out before, that is not enough.

This is getting into bothersome and heavy questions of reality and fantasy, style and content, visual and literary; and it's probably unfair to load it all on something so unsubstantial as *Tron*. It's brightly colored and moves fast, which, like so much made for big and little screens these days, seems enough for a lot of people. Computer types and video game freaks will certainly enjoy it. Others, like myself, should just shut up, lean back, and watch the pretty pictures.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Videowares dept ... I'm pleased that *Dragonslayer* appeared so speedily on video cassette, since it got lost in the rush of summer-before-last's numerous fantasy films. *Mea culpa* indeed, since it was the best of the lot and its release on tape allows me to point that out.

It's also apropos to the preceding review, since it's half a Disney production, but somehow succeeds on every point where *Tron* failed. No Disney formula here, but a pure fantasy, the content — sorcerer's apprentice takes on virgin-eating dragon — reduced almost to the simplicity of legend, but enriched and given reality by fine effects, sparingly used but utterly convincing. Here *is* a dragon flying around a mountain, which my eye *and* mind believed.

There are too many delights to list here, but they include Ralph Richardson as the best screen sorcerer I've ever seen, wise, devious and slyly witty; a dragon that is truly fearsome and not a bit reluctant, sweet, or charming, yet still touching as it noses the slain bodies of its equally repulsive spawn; and a vaguely historical but unspectacular milieu which includes dragons and magic as a matter of course. *And* some stunning photography.

Dragonslayer is a perfect example of what I have always held to work best in fantasy and s/f on screen — strong original material enhanced by good special effects, *not* subservient to them. If you haven't seen it, by all means rent the tape. If you don't have a VCR, rent that, too.

Coming soon

Next month: "Subworld" by Phyllis Eisenstein, a gripping story about a strange world beneath a subway station; also: "The Next Name You Hear," an Oxrun station chiller by Charles L. Grant and "Beyond the Dead Reef," a new story about the Quintano Roo by James Tiptree, Jr.

Watch for the January issue, on sale December 2, or use the order form on page 159 to enter your own subscription or to send a gift.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Richard Cowper's recent stories here include "Out There Where the Big Ships Go" (August 1979), "The Web of the Magi" (June 1980) and "Incident at Huacaloc" (October 1981). His latest story concerns a childhood rhyme and a family mystery that is finally resolved during a World War II bombing raid.

What Did the Deazies Do?

BY
RICHARD COWPER

In the summer of 1937 when I was nine years old and my sister Elizabeth was ten and a half my parents moved from London to East Anglia where they rented a house of the outskirts of a little village called Langmere le Willowes. The reason for our move was that my art historian father was researching his definitive study of the Norwich School of painters and needed to be within easy reach of the County Museum. His intention had been to return to London in a year or so, but the Second World War intervened bringing with it the Blitz, and by the time peace was eventually declared we had grown so attached to country life that none of us wished to give it up. However, this is by way of being background information and has nothing very much to do with anything that follows.

Elizabeth and I were placed in the village school where we quickly made new friends and acquired protective coloring in the form of the local accent. At least half the pupils in that school were related and among them three surnames predominated — Dutton, Fletcher, and Jones. In the school playground we used to chant:

The Duttons stole muttons,
The Jones hid the bones,
A Fletcher'll getcher—
And what did the Deazies do?

before we scattered shrieking to the safety of one of the ordained areas of sanctuary while whoever was 'It' tried to catch one of us and make them 'It' in turn.

That this rhyme might conceivably *mean* something never occurred to us — it was, after all, but one of a score of similar jingles which every child in the village knew by heart — until one Sunday over lunch my father remarked to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my mother: "I've just heard that one of the Cotmans married a Langmere girl — Angela Deazie. Her father was a clockmaker. A very good one too, according to Stanforth."

Elizabeth and I gazed at one another across the table and then, in almost perfect unison, we chanted: *And what did the Deazies do?*

"Eh," said my father turning from me to my sister with his eyebrows twitching in that vaguely benign but slightly astonished expression he so often adopted before us. "What's that?"

We recited our doggerel for his benefit and then repeated it a second time while he jotted the words down in the back of his diary, remarking to Mother as he did so, "When I see Peachey I'll ask him if he's got a line on this. I wouldn't mind betting it's a slice of genuine local history."

And that is exactly what it was. The Reverend Sebastian Peachey, our local historian-cum-antiquarian, was able to tell us how, during the notorious "Captain Swing" incendiary riots of the 1830's, a certain Nicholas Dutton had stolen a ewe from a local landowner and had shared his booty with his neighbor, Abraham Jones. The crime would probably have gone undetected had not one Amos Fletcher (who was rumored to have designs upon Dutton's wife) gone privily to the local justices and informed against them. The constables searched their cottages and managed to scrape up sufficient evidence to have the two of them convicted and sentenced to five years' hard labor in Tasmania. Such was country life in Merrie England before Dickens got to work on it!

Even so, this still left the fourth line unexplained, and here Mr. Peachey was less helpful, though not from any reluctance on his part. The Deazies, he told us, were not native to Langmere le Willowes in the same way the Duttons, Joneses and Fletchers were, and the name "Deazie" was, he suspected, of Continental origin. The sole representative of the family still living in the village was a sixty-three-year-old spinster who occupied a remote cottage down by the mere. Miss Sarah Deazie had a formidable reputation as a "wise woman" and, he supposed, it was more than likely that the question "What did the Deazies do?" was some sort of childish acknowledgement of the vague aura of mystery which had always surrounded the family. He was not aware of any strictly historical link between it and the rest of the jingle.

And there the matter would no doubt have ended had I not had the misfortune to become afflicted with a crop of warts. Much to my astonishment five of them (three of medium size and two small) erupted upon the back of my right hand where they steadfastly resisted all my mother's efforts to banish them with applications of dilute silver nitrate. Then, one Saturday in October, Mother took Elizabeth into Norwich to have a brace fixed on her teeth, and I was left behind

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in charge of Gladys Dutton, our daily help. Halfway through the afternoon Gladys said to me, "Get your coat right sharp, Sunny Jim, and come you alonger me."

"What for?" I demanded.

"Tha's a secret," she said, "an' you ain't t'tell your mam nothin' neither or I un't a-tekkin' you. Promise me now."

My curiosity aroused, I promised on my honor that I wouldn't say a word to a soul, and off we set hand-in-hand down the lane which led towards the mere.

It was one of those breathless autumn afternoons with just a hint of coming frost in the air. Mist was beginning to gather over the stubbled fields, the sun hung like an enormous orange lantern low down in the west, and the smoke from distant bonfires rose up so straight that they seemed like slim grey poles propping up the sky. We came to a stile, clambered over it and began heading down a winding, hazel-fringed path that led into a wood known as Barkers Holt. At which point I hung back, tugged Gladys by the hand, and said, "We're going to Ma Deazie's, aren't we?"

"Tha's right," she said. "Miss Sarah'll shift them narls off'n you quick as a blink. Here, catch holder this." She dipped her hand into her coat pocket, fished out her purse and from it extracted a sixpenny piece which she thrust into my palm. "When we come out, you mind you slip that in the sosser you'll see agin the door. Don't you forget now or all your luck'll turn sour."

"What'll she do to me, Gladys?"

"She'll charm 'em off," she said. "She has the power on't, see? All Deazies do. Not frit, are you?"

"No," I lied. "Of course not."

Miss Deazie's cottage stood in a clearing of about an acre right in the middle of the wood. It was a much more substantial building than I had expected, with a trim, Dutch-tiled roof and a host of outbuildings, all seemingly in excellent condition. A feather of blue smoke was wisping up from the massive central chimney, and as we unlatched the gate and made our way up the neat brick path to the front door, two magpies passed sarcastic remarks about us from the branches of a large walnut tree.

Gladys rat-tatted the brass door-knocker, smiled down at me reassuringly and whispered, "Don't you forget t'wipe your shoes on the mat. She's mighty particular is Miss Sarah."

I nodded, clutched my sixpence as though it were a talisman against the evil eye, and listened to the sound of approaching footsteps.

The door opened and I found myself looking up at a truly remarkable woman. She must have been close on six feet tall with short-cropped, ivory-white hair sliced off in a neat fringe across her broad forehead. She had completely black eyes (or so it seemed to me then),—black eyebrows, and olive-colored skin with scarcely a visi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ble wrinkle in it. She was wearing what looked like a man's jacket of dark-brown corduroy, a red blouse, a long, bottle-green corduroy skirt and shoes with big, square silver buckles. I stared up at her in wide-eyed and total fascination, while Gladys explained the reason for our visit.

Miss Deazie listened, nodded her head and then beckoned us inside. I scrubbed my shoes clean on the mat and followed the two of them down the stone-flagged passage into the kitchen.

From invitations to visit the homes of my school friends I was by then familiar with quite a number of the cottage kitchens in Langmere, but Miss Deazie's was not like any of them. It was large, light, and airy, and instead of the usual Victorian range it had a modern solid-fuel cooker which looked more like a piece of hospital apparatus than a stove. All the furniture was of plain wood, sturdy and practical, and a regiment of copper saucepans hung in a neat and gleaming file along the beam above the inglenook.

"You'll join me in a cup of tea, won't you Gladys? So take your coat off then. You too, boy." Her voice, though it had a good deal of the local accent, was not really a "Langmere" voice at all. But nor was it a "London" voice either. Like her dress and her kitchen it was something shaped to her own needs and purposes. I found it just as fascinating as the rest of her.

While the kettle was coming to the boil, she led me over to the window, took my hand between both of hers and examined first the back of it and then the palm. "You want me to flit 'em, do you, boy?"

"Yes, please, Miss Deazie," I said.

From the lapel of her jacket she extracted a long, silvery pin. "Shove back the sleeve of your jacket, then," she said. "Up as long as your elbow."

When I had complied she took hold of my hand again, turned it palm-uppermost and pricked me lightly five times along a line running from the crook of my elbow down to my wrist. "They'll be away by midnight, Tuesday," she said. "They un't bother you no more."

Still keeping hold of my hand, she trailed the point of the pin along a crease line which ran from the bottom of my thumb up to the base of my middle finger. Then she raised her head and, gazing directly into my eyes, said, "I see you'm right fond of machines — engines and suchlike."

How she could possibly have known this was completely beyond me. I simply nodded dumbly.

She smiled, released my hand and restored the pin to its place in her lapel. Then she walked back to the stove and busied herself over the preparations of our tea. Having filled the tea pot and stirred it briskly, she set it down on the top of the stove to draw and turned back to me. "Come you here alonger me, boy."

Without bothering to see if I was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

following, she walked out of the kitchen and down the passage to another door on the opposite side. "Wait you here a minute," she said to me. "The curtains are drawn agin the fadin'."

She unlocked the door and vanished into the room. A moment later I heard the rasp and rattle of drapes being tugged aside. As the room filled with the soft light of the waning day, I peered in and beheld what I could only suppose was some sort of museum. At one end stood a huge, dark oak cupboard, and all along the other three walls were placed stout benches. Set out upon these were perhaps fifteen or twenty dusty glass cases containing models of machines, and on the wall immediately above each case was a plan or sketch, which, I supposed, related to it. These too were framed and glazed.

Miss Deazie brushed the sleeve of her jacket across the top of one of the cases and said, more to herself than to me, "Pity they never thought t'invent a way to keep the dust off."

I looked into the nearest showcase and saw within it a sort of ghostly skeleton of a watermill. Apart from the metal axle rod on which the wheel was hung it appeared to be made of glass. The channel which guided the water onto the top of the wheel was made of glass, and so was the one which conducted the used water away. I followed this conduit with my eyes as it cranked around the base of the little mill, and then, with a sort of shifting flicker, I saw it reappear, higher up, supplying the water source once more.

Miss Deazie came over and stood beside me and peered down into the case. "Ah, that's dried up," she said. "It allus does after a bit. Would you like to see it working?"

I nodded emphatically.

"We's'll have t'see what we can do then," she said. "If you un't say a word to no one, just pop back here on your own next Saturday afternoon, I'll see if I can't get some of 'em shiftin' agin. Reckon as they'd all benefit."

"Did Mr. Deazie make all these?" I asked.

Her eyebrows rose. "An' who's Mr. Deazie, when he's at home?"

I blushed. "Wasn't he a clockmaker?"

She gazed at me thoughtfully. "Ah," she murmured, "maybe. Maybe. But whoever told *you* that?"

"My father said so," I replied. "He said Angela Deazie's father was a clockmaker. A very good one."

"Did he now? Angela Deazie's father a clockmaker? Yes, yes, that could 'a bin. There's clocks enough in this house, all the conscience."

As she was speaking I observed that one of the little mechanisms had begun to revolve slowly and silently within its case, and I went across to examine it. I had never seen anything like it in my life, It appeared to consist of two (or was it more?) three-dimensional equilateral triangles made up of glass rods and suspended in such a way that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that each one appeared to revolve *within* the others, and yet, by some extraordinary illusion, they all seemed to be exactly the same size. It was for all the world as if they were constantly changing places with each other, and yet I could never quite make out where one ended and the next began. Always there would come that same instant of flickering indecision which I had experienced with the water wheel — a moment when my perception was twisted askew and then flipped back again in a different mode. Nor could I see any trace of the clockwork or electrical mechanism which was making it revolve. "How does it work, Miss Deazie?" I asked. "Where's its motor?"

"There's motors we can see and them as we can't," she replied. "That's one of them as we can't. Come you on alonger me now or our tea'll be gettin' cold."

She stepped back into the passageway and, reluctantly, I followed her. As I crossed the threshold I glanced back over my shoulder at the extraordinary gyrating three-dimensional triangles only to discover that the glass case in which they were displayed was now acting as a mirror and reflecting the light of the nearby window so that I could see nothing inside at all.

Miss Deazie was as good as her word. When I woke up on the Wednesday morning following my visit to her cottage, I found that my warts had vanished. All that was left were the five dark brown spots where Mother's silver nitrate had stained my skin. I rushed downstairs into the kitchen and displayed my hand to Gladys. "Well, what did you expect?" she said. "If Sarah says they'll go, they'll go. But don't you never say nothin' to your mam. She wouldn't hold with it. Promise me now."

For the rest of that week Sarah Deazie and her room of strange machines were never far from my thoughts. When Saturday arrived I told Elizabeth that I had been invited to play football on the Common with my school friends (which had the incidental merit of being true); then, immediately lunch was over, I set off for Barkers Holt.

When I reached Sarah's cottage I found a man I did not recognize digging in the kitchen garden. I nodded to him and he nodded back. "Is Miss Deazie in?" I asked.

"Reckon," he said, which I translated from Langmere laconic to mean that she was.

I walked up to the front door and was just about to knock when it was opened from inside. "Oh, so you've come then," said Miss Deazie.

"You did say to, didn't you, Miss Deazie?"

"Yes, yes, boy. Come you along in."

She took my coat and hung it on a peg behind the door. I showed her my hand. She glanced at it and smiled.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Surprised, were you?"

"A bit" I confessed. "Thank you very much."

She smiled again and said, "I've had a lick round with a duster since last week and I've got some on 'em workin' agin. Get you in an' see for yourself whiles I slip out an' have a word wi' Mr. Pendlebury."

She unlocked the door to the room where the machines were, ushered me in and then strode away down the passage and out into the garden. Prickling with excitement, I moved forward into the center of the room and gazed about me.

Warm autumn sunlight was streaming in through the low windows; the air smelt clean and sharp with the scent of fresh wax polish; and, in perhaps half of the display cases, the models were now working. Little bright sparkles and pinpricks of light flickered on and off as the glass wheels turned, the cranks rocked back and forth, and the mysterious little spectral geometries spiraled around and merged into one another. But none was making any sound that I was able to detect.

My eye alighted upon the glass mill and I walked across and peered down into the case. Water was trickling down the miniature leat, falling in a silent wavering tread onto the twinkling paddles of the overshot wheel, and within the transparent mill house the little beveled cogs were turning sweetly and soundlessly. In the lower leat the used water dribbled away along its channel, skirted around the base of the mill, turned back upon itself, once, twice, thrice, and ... *and flowed gently down the leat again onto the top of the wheel!* I stared and stared until my eyes ached, and *nowhere* could I detect any point at which the water was flowing *up* hill. It was as if I were forever adding one and one and one and one, counting them off upon my fingers, and then discovering that the answer came to five. I even tried surreptitiously lifting up the case, only to find that it was locked immovably to the bench top.

I moved on round the room, and ever and again, peering into the cases, I would arrive at an instant where my perception was teased out to the point of incredulity and then, by means of a sort of instinctive mental somersault, contrived to re-establish itself upon another plane. It was almost as if each contrivance were saying to me: "Thus far and no further." But what they were designed *for* was at least as much of a mystery to me as how they functioned, and when Miss Deazie eventually reappeared, I pointed to the gyrating and flickering tetrahedrons and put my question to her direct.

"What's it *for?*" she repeated. "Well, now, boy, I durst venture we might say it was showin' us a way in and a way out. Like a sort o' door or a window, see? Summat like that."

I stared at her, thinking she must surely be making fun of me, but her ex-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pression was perfectly serious. So I put my face us as close as I could get to the glass case without my breath clouding the surface, and gazed into the heart of it.

It was thus that I discovered how, by steadfastly ignoring the illusory advance and retreat of the skeletal forms, I was able to focus my attention upon an area which was seemingly contained within them — a sort of focal point of stillness at the very center. And there was my own eye gazing out at me as if it were being reflected back from the surface of an invisible mirror — *only it wasn't my own eye!*

I gave a yelp of astonishment, jerked my head back and cannoned into Miss Deazie, who had moved up unperceived and was now standing immediately behind me. "There's someone there!" I gasped. "Someone looking at me! Look! Look!"

She put her head down beside mine, but the eye which I had seen was no longer there.

"It was there!" I cried. "Honestly it was! I saw it!"

"Well, it ain't there now," she said. "Reckon you must 'a frit him as much as he frit you," and this time she did laugh.

"You believe it?" I said. "You don't think I just made it up?"

"Why, no, boy. I don't doubt they watch us just the same as we do them. What's in to us'll be out to them. It's but a way o' lookin'."

It is not easy to convey the extraordinarily matter-of-fact manner in which she said these words, and so my own acceptance of them must perforce be taken on trust. Yet accept them I did, perhaps because I myself had *seen* that other silent watcher eye-to-eye. "But who *are* they?" I demanded. "And *where* are they?"

"They're the others, boy. Them on the other side. You don't want to bother you head about them."

"You mean they're *real?*" I insisted. "Real like us?"

"I dunno 'bout that 'xactly. but to thairselves I reckon they must be. Wouldn't make sense else, would it?"

I looked from her pensive face back to the little machine in which the shapes were forever dissolving and reconstituting themselves around their invisible focus. "But can they...? *Could* they...?" Somehow I could not quite bring myself to say: "Get out."

Miss Deazie shook her head. "They'll have their own lives to lead wi'out wantin' a share in ours."

"But *could* they?" I insisted. "If someone made a bigger one of those? As big as — as big as a man, say?" — and I spread my arms to indicate the dimensions I had in mind for such a noble project.

She studied my face as though undecided how best to respond. "Ah," she murmured. " 'N what did the Deazies do?"

My mouth dropped in astonishment. "You mean he *did?*" I gasped. "He's *done* it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"An' just who's this 'he' supposed to be, boy?"

"Why, the clockmaker, of course. The man who made all these," and I waved my arm round at the glass cases.

"Arthur Deazie? But he never made these. That was him up there." She indicated one of the pictures on the wall — a three-quarter length portrait of a swarthy-faced man with a small pointed beard and neatly waxed mustache, dressed in the clothes of Napoleonic times. "He an' his kin contrived these," she said. "Leastways that's what I was told when I was a gel."

I hurried across to the picture and stared up at it. It was very dark, though whether this was a result of the passage of years or was intentional on the part of the artist I was in no position to judge. What I did observe, however, was that occupying the background was a shadowy, geometric tracery which bore an undoubted resemblence to that very machine in which I had observed the eye observing me. On a tarnished gilded strip fastened to the bottom of the frame was inscribed the name GIOVANNI D'ASSISI.

And suddenly I found that I was very frightened indeed. It was the kind of purely instinctive fear that had gripped me in the previous winter when, all alone, I had ventured far out onto the frozen mere and had suddenly heard the ice going *wheep-wheep!* as the cracks sang out ahead of me and I had gingerly — oh, so gingerly! — edged my way back over the void of black and hungry water to the sanctuary of the reed-fringed shore with my fluttering heart shrunk to the size of a shriveled pea.

"What is it, boy?"

I dragged my gaze away from the somber eyes of the long-dead Italian and shivered as though someone had trodden on my grave. What I felt then I could not express, for I had glimpsed a rent in the veil of reality and what lay beyond it was strange and dark and threatening.

Miss Deazie came over to me and caught hold of my hand. "Come you alonger me, boy," she said. "I've got a gingerbread in the oven. Let's you 'an me go and see if he's done."

She drew me out of the room into the passageway, closed the door with a thump behind her, and turned the key in the lock.

I have often wondered what it was Sarah Deazie thought she had seen written in the lines of my hand which had put it into her head to let me examine the curious treasures she kept hidden away in that room of hers. She never allowed me in there again though I begged her many times. "Ah, you don't want to go pokin' about in there, boyu. It's all nasty old dust and cobwebs," was the nearest she ever came to even acknowledging its existence, and the door was always firmly locked, the curtains drawn.

And gradually, inevitably, it be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

came of less and less importance to me as other adolescent interests arose to supplant it. The following autumn (1938) I left the village school in Langmere and began traveling daily to a grammar school in Norwich. Then came the war, and my youthful imagination was filled in turn with visions of *blitzkrieg* and Panzers and screaming Stukas; with aerial dogfights over the Kentish coast; and finally with newspaper maps of North Africa, Russia, Burma, and God knows where, on which the black arrows wriggled back and forth as the fortunes of battle dictated.

As the years rolled by, my visits to Miss Deazie grew ever rarer and at last ceased altogether. Occasionally I would catch sight of her in the village post office, and we always greeted each other with a smile and a nod and perhaps some vapid politeness, but that was as far as it went. Sometimes I didn't see her for months on end.

Then, one day in the summer of 1943, about a fortnight after my fifteenth birthday, I was waiting to board a late train back from Norwich to Biddenham Halt — the station which served as Langmere's principal connection with the outside world — when who should I chance to see standing on the platform ahead of me but the unmistakable figure of Miss Deazie. I was still wondering whether to pretend I hadn't noticed her when she turned her head and smiled at me. I smiled back and, a minute later, the train pulled in and I found myself committed to sharing a compartment with her.

Almost the first thing I remember her saying to me was: "Since them fags is like to burn a hole in you pocket, we might as well smoke 'em." I grinned, produced the crumpled paper packet, offered it to her, and we both lit up.

She let her head sink back against the dusty plush, surveyed me with those strange dark eyes of hers, and observed: "It's about time I was havin' a word wi' you, lad."

"Oh, yes?" I said. "About what?"

"Has anyone been enquirin' of you 'bout me?"

"About *you?*" I said, and the surprise in my voice could hardly have escaped her. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

She didn't answer straight away; then she gave a curious little shrug and said, "Recent there's bin a message come."

"A message?" I echoed. "What about?"

"I suppose we might call it a warnin'."

I stared at her wondering if I'd heard correctly. "Did you say 'a warning'?"

She leant over towards me. "You'd not mind if I was to take another scan of your hand, would you, lad?"

At that instant I might well have been nine years old all over again. I don't think I hesitated for a second. I thrust out my hands to her palms uppermost.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She gazed from one to the other for perhaps the length of a count of five; then she murmured. "Ah, you're the one all right. It's writ here plain as print."

"What is, Miss Deazie?"

"You an' me, lad. We're threaded together, see? Reckon we'll just have to make the best on't."

I did my best to grin but the result was a pretty sickly travesty of the real thing. I turned my head and looked out of the window at the sunny meadows rocking past, and I realized that some part of me was still back there in that dusty room where she had first shown me her mysterious machines in their glass cases. "What did you mean about a message?" I said. "What sort of a message?"

"Oh, there's allus been them as 'ud wade through Nick's Pit to see what you've seen, lad, and one o' these days they're bound t'come a-lookin' for it agin. But we're wise t'them. They don't get far wi'out us knowing."

"Who don't, Miss Deazie?"

She was suddenly preoccupied with her crumpled cigarette, which appeared to have developed a critical leak in its casing.

"Who *are* they, Miss Deazie?" I repeated.

"Who knows, lad? They'll a' slipped through from beyond like. From t'other side."

"Beyond?" I echoed dully. "Was that where Giovanni D'Assisi came from?"

She blinked at me pensively through the azure fronds of tobacco smoke and nodded her head slowly. "Reckon," she said.

When I reached home I discovered that we had visitors. A jeep was parked outside the front door, and as I let myself in and climbed the stairs I could hear American voices issuing from the drawing room. Having brushed my teeth to banish the smell of tobacco, I went down to see what was going on. I was just about to go in when the door was dragged open from inside and my sister came out. Her eyes were sherry-bright and her cheeks flushed. "Oh, hello," she said. "How did you get on?"

"We won," I said. "Who's here?"

"A Major Beddoes and his friend. From Boston" (she exaggerated it to "Barstern"). "Go on in. I'm just getting some more ice."

She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, and I slipped into the drawing room to find my father and an American officer with their heads bent over a portfolio of sketches. My mother was standing beside another officer near the open french windows. She appeared to be pointing to something in the garden.

The officer at my father's side glanced up and grinned at me. He had very pale blue eyes, short sandy hair and sandy eyebrows, and his cheeks looked as smooth and shiny as if he had just that minute polished them with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

jewelers' rouge. "Hi there," he said genially. "I guess you must be the ace pitcher we've been hearing about." He extended his hand. "Beddoes," he said. "Mark Beddoes. United States Army Air Force."

I shook the hand and found it soft and faintly moist. "Are you stationed at Emmingham, sir?" I asked.

"You're right," he said, "though naturally that's a top-grade military secret," and he winked at me.

"Are you flying Forts?"

"I'd say that was a pretty shrewd guess, Richard."

My father chose that moment to hold one of the sketches up to the light. He examined it closely, then said, "There's no question this is a John Thirtle — a preliminary sketch for his *Mill on the Yare*, I'd say. You're a very lucky man, Major. Oh, hello, Richard. I didn't hear you come in. How did the match go?"

"We won by five wickets," I said. "Can I have a sherry?"

"Go ahead, old boy. Help yourself. Another whiskey for you, Major?"

Elizabeth appeared at the doorway holding a bowl of ice cubes. "Here are your rocks, Major," she said, " or should I say 'rarcks'?"

"What's wrong with 'rawks,' Elizabeth?" he replied, and they both laughed.

I selected the largest glass I could see and filled it to the brim with sherry. Without quite knowing why, I decided that I didn't care for Major Beddoes very much.

Mother did her best to persuade our visitors to stay to supper, but they wouldn't hear of it. "That would be trespassing on your hospitality, ma'am," said Beddoes. "Believe me we know the problems you people are up against, what with rationing and all. But if you'd allow us to transfer the invitation to Sunday, then we could make our own contribution to the commissariat...."

Thus it was that, almost without our realizing it was happening, Major Beddoes and Lieutenant Fletcher began to insinuate themselves into the fabric of our lives. They were unfailingly polite and helpful and danced constant attendance upon Elizabeth and my mother, who both appeared to relish every minute of it. Beddoes was an avid collector of antiques and had a knack of hunting out bargains which was almost uncanny. His specialty was early 19th century watercolor drawings, and he would bring along each new acquisition to receive my father's official imprimatur.

One afternoon he arrived bearing a parcel neatly wrapped in brown paper. "This one's for you, sir," he said, handing it to Father. "A small token of my appreciation."

Father unwrapped it to discover that very sketch by John Thirtle which he had spotted and had so much admired. Major Beddoes had had it specially mounted and framed in Norwich. By any assessment it was an astonishingly generous gift, and Father was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

completely overwhelmed. Anglo-U.S. relations reached an all-time high, and I suspect that if at the moment Beddoes had seen fit to ask for Elizabeth's hand in marriage, not only would Father have agreed, he'd probably have been happy to chuck in Mother as well.

The major stayed on till late in the evening. Father had insisted on opening a second bottle of his precious prewar Chablis, and I think we all got a bit tipsy. We sat out on the lawn in the deck chairs while the sun sank in the barely acknowledged miracle of copper and rose-pink over the long waters of the mere and the shell-shattered Flying Fortresses limped home to Emmingham, firing off their red and green Very lights to signify how many dead and wounded they had aboard. Elizabeth asked if Lieutenant Fletcher was flying today.

"No, Roger's out hunting up ancestors," said Beddoes. "Seems that the New Hampshire Fletchers originated from round these parts."

"Oh, we've heaps of Fletchers round here," said Mother. "They're one of our three biggest families. The Duttons, the Joneses and the Fletchers."

"And what did the Deazies do?" giggled Elizabeth.

"I beg your pardon?" said Beddoes, turning to her.

"Nothing," she said. "Just being silly."

"Did you say 'Deazies', Elizabeth?"

"She's tight," I said. "Ignore her."

Major Beddoes's face had taken on a curiously alert expression. "You know that's the first time I've heard that name in over twenty years," he said. "It takes me clear back to my childhood. I once had an old maiden aunt called Deazie. She lived up in the Green Mountains in Vermont. She died way back in twenty-two."

"Oh, we have a Deazie living right here in Langmere," said Mother. "I'm happy to say she's very much alive."

"Is that so, ma'am?"

"She must be close on seventy," said Mother. "Miss Sarah Deazie. Perhaps she's some distant relative of yours, Mark."

"That hardly seems possible," said Beddoes. "What's she like?"

"I'd say she was a remarkably spry old girl for her years," said Father. "Always looks as fit as a flea."

"And remarkably independent too," said Mother.

"She sounds quite a character."

"She once charmed away Richard's warts," said Elizabeth. "Ow! Stop it you pig!"

"Really?" said Beddoes, turning his pale-blue eyes upon me. "And how did she do that?"

"I've forgotten," I muttered. "It was a long time ago."

"Rubbish!" said Elizabeth, massaging her shin histrionically. "She did it with a pin. He told me so. She pricked his arm and they disappeared overnight."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If looks could have killed, my sister would have been lying stretched out stiff at my feet. As it was she babbled blithely: "When we first came to Langmere, Richard was always sneaking off to see her." She turned confidingly to the major and stage-whispered, "I think she cast a spell on him."

Beddoes laughed. "You mean she has a reputation as a witch!"

"Of course not," I said crossly. "She just prefers to keep herself to herself, that's all."

"And she lives right here in the village?"

"In the middle of a forest down by the misty moisty mere," said Elizabeth, "with five black cats and an owl and a toad in a house with a roof made of gingerbread."

While she was fantasizing, another Flying Fortress came limping home on two engines. A veritable Christmas tree of colored lights descended from it. "Oh dear, oh dear," sighed Mother. "Those poor, poor boys. I can't bear to think of it."

But Major Beddoes's eyes were not upon the evening sky, they were upon me, and their expression can best be described as contemplative, as though at that moment his thoughts were a million miles away.

After the major had driven off back to camp, I made my peace with my sister and retired to my attic bedroom. I locked the door behind me and opened the window as far as it would go. Then I lit a cigarette, propped my elbows on the windowsill and, gazing out into the night, tried to marshal my thoughts into some sort of coherent order.

It was now all of six weeks since I had had that peculiar conversation on the train with Miss Deazie, and this was the first occasion on which anyone could be said to have asked me anything about her. But, on the face of it, what could have been more casual or less sinister than Major Beddoes's inquiry? So why did I find it so hard to believe in his maiden aunt in Vermont? For I now realized that I didn't believe in her at all, and yet I didn't know *why* I didn't. For some unknown reason she was infinitely less real to my imagination than were those shadowy figures who had their being in some unspecified dimension which *my* Miss Deazie had never referred to as anything other than "beyond" or "on t'other side." If anything was unbelievable, that was, and yet *I* believed in it, just as I believed in her and in the dim and enigmatic figure of Giovanni D'Assisi.

Far off to the southeast a searchlight battery was thoughtfully fingering a tissue of low cloud, probing for a sneak raider. For some minutes I watched the beams prowling restlessly back and forth, and then, without ever quite acknowledging that I had done so, I discovered that I had resolved to call upon Miss Deazie and acquaint her with what had happened.

When I awoke next morning, my mission seemed a good deal less urgent

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than it had in the afterglow of Father's Chablis, and it was not until the middle of the afternoon that I set out for Barkers Holt.

I found Miss Deazie busy in her kitchen garden picking late peas. "Well, well. Look who's here!" she called cheerily as she caught sight of me. "We're quite the stranger these days."

"Hello, Miss Deazie," I responded. "Can I give you a hand?"

"I'm all done here, lad," she said. "But you can help me shuck 'em, if you like."

She passed over her basket and led the way into the house.

"You must be very partial to peas," I said. "There's enough for an army in here."

"Well, I'm expecting company," she said. "Wouldn't do to let 'em go short. Not after all the way they'll 'a come."

"Relations of yours?"

"Ah, so you might say." She gave vent to a kind of explosive snort of laughter. "Not what you'd call blood relations, though."

I followed her into her kitchen and set the basket down on the table. "You remember that time you spoke to me on the train?" I said.

Miss Deazie said nothing, just tipped her head slightly to one side like a wise old bird and twinkled a dark eye at me.

"You asked me if anyone had been inquiring about you."

"Yes, yes," she said and nodded her head vigorously.

"Well, last night, someone did. An American officer. A Major Beddoes." And I told her what had happened.

She handed me a pudding basin, took one for herself, and then spilled the pea pods out in a tumbled heap on the table between us. For all the interest she showed in what I had recounted I felt I needn't have bothered. "Well," I concluded lamely, "I just thought you might like to know."

"Yes, yes, lad. I was cogitatin' on Vermont. That'll have been Mathilda, see?"

I gasped at her. "You mean she's *real* — *was* real, I mean? He wasn't just making her up?"

"Oh, no, lad," she said. "Mathilda was one of us Deazies all right. She won't never ha' told *him* nothin' though, else I'd 'a heard by now."

"You mean that Major Beddoes really *is* a relation of yours?"

"Not a *relation*. Oh, no, I wouldn't say that. Not what *you'd* call a relation."

"So what is he then?"

She split open a plump green pod and the peas rattled into the basin in her lap. "Reckon we might do worse 'n call him a sniffer," she said. "He'll be the one who'll allus have his nose down on the ground, questin' back an' forth, allus busy a-sniff-sniff-sniffin' out things fer his Mister Getcher Fletcher."

"*A Fletcher'll getcher*," I murmured.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sarah gave a sudden wicked cackle of laughter. "Yes, yes, lad! You've hit it! But *what'll the Deazies do?* that's what they'll be askin' theirselves, will our precious Mister Getcher Fletcher an' our sniff-sniff-sniffin' Mister Nosey Beddoes."

I gazed across at her and my face creased into a slow, admiring grin. "You know all about them, don't you?" I said. "You've known all along. I almost believe you've planned this, Miss Deazie."

"Get away wi' you, lad," she said. "Whatever will you be a-sayin' next?"

"And where do I fit in?" I asked.

Sarah garnered up a fresh pea pod in her freckled hand and pointed it at me like a green pistol. "There's webs within webs," she mused, "an' traps within traps, an' time's not for foolin' with. So you tek a morsel o' cheese to bait your trap — summat for the sniffer t'sniff, t'make his mouth water and his whiskers twitch — summat that's calculated to draw 'em in at just the right moment, then — *snap!*" She popped the pod with her thumb and laughed.

"And that's me? The bait?"

She shook her head. " 'Tain't that simple, lad," she said. "There's the bait, and the smell o' the bait, and the air which wafts the smell o' the bait to the nose o' the sniffer — and that's only the start of it. Reckon there's enough peas here for four, do you?"

"Four?" I said. "Beddoes, and Fletcher, and you and...?"

"Fancy a supper of roast duck an' fresh green peas, do you lad?"

"Tonight?"

"Seven o'clock. On the stroke. An' don't you be late, mind, whatever you do, for I dussen't keep 'em waitin'."

"Crikey!" I said. "What's going to happen?"

"You get busy shuckin' an' leave me to worry about that," said Miss Deazie.

Not long after half past six, transformed by a clean white shirt, my best pair of grey flannels and my dark-blue First XI blazer, I retraced my steps to Miss Deazie's. As I approached the stile, I saw that a jeep was already parked in the gateway to a nearby meadow. I walked over to it, felt the radiator and found it was still warm. At that moment I heard the church clock beginning to strike the hour, and remembering how Miss Deazie had said "on the stroke," I ran to the stile, vaulted over it, and sprinted down the path into the wood.

If Major Beddoes and Lieutenant Fletcher were surprised when I walked into Miss Deazie's kitchen, they concealed it admirably, though I suppose it's quite possible she had told them I was coming. "Well, hello there, Richard! Long time no see!" cried Beddoes, exposing his improbably white and even teeth in an affable grin. The heavy-brown and saturnine Fletcher contented himself with a cool, " 'Lo, Richard."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hello," I said. "I saw the jeep up the road and guessed you were here."

"Helluva place to find," said Beddoes. "You'd never think there was a house tucked away down here unless you'd been told, would you? Must be all of coupla hundred years old, I'd say."

"A hundred and fifty," said Miss Deazie, appearing in the doorway of the scullery with a tray on which were set out four glass tumblers, a bottle and a jug. "The date's carved out up on a beam in the hall. A.D. 1793."

I blinked at her in astonishment. Her "Langmere" voice had vanished as though a tap had been turned off. It was almost uncanny.

She set down the tray on the table and winked at me covertly. "There's no ice, I'm afraid, boys," she said, "but the water's fresh-drawn cool from the well. Help yourselves."

Beddoes screwed the stopper from the bottle, poured out a generous slug of bourbon into three of the glasses, and then glanced up at me questioningly.

"Just a small one," I said. "Thanks."

Sarah stripped the cellophane wrapping from a packet of Camel cigarettes and offered them around. Beddoes took one and so did I. Fletcher declined with a shake of his head. Sarah laughed. "You're the wise one. Mr. Fletcher. Know what we say about these things? They're the only fags with a picture of the factory on the packet. But don't think I'm not grateful. Beggars can't be choosers."

"No one has to be a beggar," said Fletcher. "Least of all you, Miss Deazie."

"Oh, I'm no beggar," said Sarah. "I'd say I was doing very nicely, thank you. Very nicely indeed. What with my bits and pieces and my pension coming in regular and all."

"You're sitting on a nest egg," said Fletcher. "All you need is some expertise in exploiting it."

"As the fox said to the chicken," said Miss Deazie.

Listening to them, I began to get the odd impression that the conversation I was hearing wasn't the *real* conversation at all but was a sort of code which they all understood and I didn't. And it occurred to me then, for the first time in my life, that Miss Deazie must have some other source of income which I knew nothing about, something that placed her in quite a different category from all the other old pensioners in the village. But it was not exactly a subject I felt I could question her about. So I sipped at my bourbon-and-water and puffed away at my Camel, and, by keeping my ears pricked, I learned to my astonishment that not only had Sarah visited the United States but also traveled quite extensively in Europe. The notion of my Miss Deazie strolling along the Promenade des Anglais or popping into the Vatican or even owning a passport was one I found considerable difficulty in coming to terms with, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

neither Beddoes nor Fletcher appeared to share my problem.

Just before she served the supper, Sarah sent me down into the cellar with instructions to bring up two bottles of elderberry wine. "The '41, mind," she said. "It's on the bottom rack and all labeled. You'll find a torch on the shelf at the top of the stairs."

Perhaps it was an effect of the unaccustomed bourbon, but the simple task took me rather longer to perform than it might otherwise have done. When I regained the passage clutching the cool, dusty bottles, I heard Fletcher saying: "Well, that's the basic proposition. Take it or leave it. It's up to you."

"Then I'll leave it, Mr. Fletcher."

"Aw, come on, be reasonable, ma'am." (This was Beddoes). "You know the Flasconis have at least as much right to it as the Deazies have. We've got the original witnessed deeds with the old man's signature. Show her, Roger."

"Don't bother," said Sarah. "That writ doesn't run on this side and never was done. The Flasconis lost their case on appeal in 1805. Whatever Giovanni conjured up on this side is Deazie property, and Deazie it stays in perpetuity. That was the judgment, boys, and well you know it. So if you'll just stop fretting and get yourselves sat down. You over there, Mr. Fletcher. You here, Mr. Beddoes...."

I pushed the door and went in.

That meal was delicious, the duck a golden bird of paradise, the peas and buttery potatoes as tender and sweet as kisses, the wine a fragrant revelation, but neither Major Beddoes nor Lieutenant Fletcher seemed to appreciate it half as much as Miss Deazie and I did. On at least two occasions Fletcher tried to reopen the topic which was obviously preying upon his mind only to have Sarah silence him with: "I've nothing more to say on the subject, Mr. Fletcher, and I'll thank you to remember that. Some more gravy for you, Mr. Beddoes?"

We moved on to apple pie and cream which was every bit as good as the duck had been, and then I helped Sarah to carry the dishes out into the scullery. I stacked them up on the draining board beside the stone sink and was about to return to the kitchen when Sarah plucked me by the sleeve of my blazer, drew me back, and placed a finger to her lips. "Bide you here a minute, lad," she whispered in her familiar Langmere voice: "I just want to see what kinder mischief they two crafty monkey's 'll be gettin' up to." And then, louder: "Would you mind running the opener round this tin of coffee for me while I set out some cups and saucers on a tray?"

I heard a door click and guessed it must be the one which led from the kitchen out to the passage. I looked enquiringly at Miss Deazie but she just shook her head and winked at me. "All in good time, lad," she murmured. "We'm needs let 'em get a good nibble at the cheese."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

After some minutes had elapsed she nodded to me, picked up her tray and carried it through into the kitchen. I followed close at her heels, and, as I had expected, there was no sign of either Major Beddoes or Lieutenant Fletcher. Sarah set down the tray, went over to the door and tried the handle. The door was locked. She made a quiet clucking noise with her tongue against her teeth, then came back into the center of the room and turned up the twin flames of the oil lamp which hung above the table. It seemed to me as if she were listening for something. "Shall I go out through the scullery and run round and unlock it?" I said.

"No, no, lad, we'm needs let 'em be till ten."

I glanced up at the Victorian wall clock above the mantelpiece and saw that it was showing twenty minutes to the hour. "What are they doing?" I asked.

"Mekkin' the biggest mistake o' their lives," she replied grimly. "You be a good lad now and draw them black-outs close, and I'll see if I can't fix us both a nice cupper tea. It's better for you than coffee."

As I was tugging the heavy velvet curtains across the second window, I felt the glass shake. Peering out into the darkness, I saw the far-off flicker of searchlights over the treetops to the east. The faint *crump-crump* of distant ack-ack fire was borne to my ears. "Looks like another raid on Lowestoft," I said, and I twitched the curtains to.

Miss Deazie glanced up at the clock and nodded, but she didn't say anything.

The kettle on the stove was just starting to purr when the windows shook again. I jumped back, ran through into the scullery, drew back a corner of the black-out blind and squinted out. In the distance a score of searchlights had clustered together like a huge bell tent, and tiny pinpricks of fire were winking like sparks high up in the peak of it. "They're coming this way, Miss Deazie!" I called. "I wonder if they're going for Emmingham?"

"Come you in here alonger me, lad," said Miss Deazie, "an' let that blind be."

Reluctantly I relinquished my spy hole and returned to the kitchen where I sat down once more and listened to the window panes rattling under the thump of guns and the far-off thud of exploding bombs. Sarah shook two cigarettes out of the packet, handed one to me and struck a match. She had lit mine and was just about to light her own when she twitched the flame aside and said: "There! That'll be them now!"

I cocked my ear and heard faint voices retreating down the garden path. The windows shook again even louder than before. "Are you sure that was them?" I asked.

Sarah glanced up at the clock which was now showing four minutes to the hour. Calmly she lit her cigarette and then blew out the match.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Reckon," she said.

"What have they been up to?"

"Helpin' theirselves where they'd no business to," she said. "Little good it'll do 'em. Hush now."

There was a brief lull in the firing, and I detected the familiar panting drone of enemy aircraft somewhere overhead. Then the ack-ack batteries around Emmingham suddenly opened up, and their flash and flicker leaked into the room around the margins of the black-out. A moment later I caught the high-pitched weasel-squeal of falling bombs. "Crikey!" I cried. "It *is* Emmingham! I'm going out to take a look!"

"You stay right here, lad!" The ring of authority in her voice was absolute. I stayed.

The clock whirred and began to chime tinnily — *dong! dong! dong! dong!* At the fourth stroke I heard a loud explosion which I knew could not be more than a mile away. There was a second, louder, almost immediately, and then a third, much louder still. Recognizing a stick of bombs coming our way, I ducked my head instinctively. The house rocked to its foundations, the lamp flame flapped, and some china crashed to the floor in the scullery. There was one further explosion further off and then only a sort of muffled silence.

Slowly I raised my head and let out my stifled breath in a long, long sigh. "Jesus Christ!" I whispered. "I really thought we'd had it that time."

"Don't you ever let me hear you taking His name in vain," said Miss Deazie. "I'm right shamed on you."

"Sorry," I said. "I was just scared to death, that's all."

She nodded and then smiled and I guessed I was forgiven. "It's all right now," she said. "You can run round and unlock the door. If they've took out the key, you'll find a spare atop the grandfather clock right agin the stairs."

I hurried out through the scullery into the garden. The Emmingham guns were still firing intermittently, but the throb of aircraft had retreated into the distance northwards. There was a strange, sharp acrid tang on the air which I guessed must be high explosive. I shivered retrospectively and scuttled round to the front door.

I felt my way down the dark hall to the kitchen door. The key was still there in the lock and I turned it without difficulty. By then Miss Deazie had lit another lamp. She came out into the passage and walked over to the museum door, which I now saw was standing ajar. "Hold you on to this, lad," she said, handing over her lamp to me. "I'll have t'draw them curtains close, else we're like to have the A.R.P. on our backs."

A minute later she called me into the room which I had not entered for six years. It looked much as I remembered it, except that the dust was lying even more thickly upon the glass cases and, apart from the portrait of Giovanni, there were now no pictures up-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on the walls. The frames were still there though, flung down in an untidy jumble of splintered wood and broken glass in the middle of the floor. Only the drawings which they had held were missing.

Miss Deazie came over to me, took the lamp from my hand and advanced slowly down the room towards the great oak cupboard which occupied most of the end wall. As the lamp light fell upon it, I saw that the wood was scarred down the edges of the doors as if someone had tried to force them open. I watched her examining the damage; then she stooped and appeared to be feeling around the carved decoration at the base. There was a sudden click and both doors swung outwards. I had a brief, tantalizing glimpse of some strange, glittering reticulation which seemed vaguely familiar, and then she had thrust the doors to again and clicked them shut.

"What are you going to do?" I said. "Call the police?"

"It'll be too late for that now, lad," she said. "I'm a-goin' t'get my coat on and walk you some o' way home. Your mum and dad's like to be frettin' on you."

"You mean you're just going to let them get away with it?"

She looked at me darkly and then shook her head. "They'll not get away wi' it," she said.

While she was putting on her coat, I told her what I had overheard while I was fetching the wine before supper.

"What was it they were after?" I said. "Was it just those drawings?"

"What d'you think, lad?"

"Beddoes could have been," I said. "I know he collects pictures."

"Then that's some I daresay he'll wish he'd never collected."

"Was there something else then?"

Sarah chuckled. "Reckon there must a'bin," she said.

"They didn't get it, did they?"

"No," she said, "they didn't get it. They'll 'a got something though."

"What?"

"More'n they bargained for, I reckon."

She finished buttoning up her coat, took down a flashlight that was hanging on a hook beside the front door, and we stepped out into the now-quiet night and followed the pale splash of the torch beam through the wood and down the hazel track to the stile. "It's all right, Miss Deazie," I said. "You don't need come any further. I know the way blindfold from here."

"A coupla steps more, lad," she said. "Just to see you safe over the stile. Mind where you're puttin' your feet now."

I clambered up onto the step, swung my leg over, and skipped down into the roadway on the other side.

And then I saw the jeep.

I suppose it must have been a direct hit. The engine and one of the front wheels were lodged high up in the hedge, and the back half was lying upside-down, smoldering, at the bottom

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the crater. For what seemed hours I just stood locked in the middle of the road and stared at it. Then I came to my senses, stumbled forward, and peering down over the heaped-up earth saw what half an hour before had been either Major Beddoes or Lieutenant Fletcher. "Oh my God," I whispered, and in one violent, involuntary spasm I vomited up the whole of my supper.

I felt a hand descend upon my shaking shoulder. "That's the best way, lad," said Miss Deazie calmly. "You'll be free on it now," and she pushed a handkerchief into my hand.

In retrospect what followed can only be classed as anticlimax. I remember walking into the village with Miss Deazie where together we sought out Sergeant Pendlebury, our local Home Guard officer, and told him more or less what had happened. After that, I made my own way home where I recounted the grisly news to my family. As I recall it, they seemed considerably more relieved to discover that I had survived to tell of my experience than they were desolated to learn that Major Beddoes and Lieutenant Fletcher had gone to join the Great Collector in the Sky. Naturally I omitted to say just what the two of them had been up to in Miss Deazie's house — I simply wouldn't have known where to begin.

Next day, a U.S. Army rescue truck came out from Emmingham and dragged away what was left of the jeep. What was left of Beddoes and Fletcher had already been removed by an ambulance in the small hours of the morning. At neither of these events was I present.

I remember feeling extraordinarily *tired* for some days after it happened, but this, I think, was just an effect of delayed shock. I spent quite a lot of the time lying on my bed, gazing blankly up at the ceiling, and trying without any success whatsoever to make some sort of sense of it all. I knew there must *be* a connection between that bomb and Miss Deazie — I was wholly convinced that she had know it was going to drop just when and where it did and that somehow she had contrived to arrange for Beddoes and Fletcher to be right there under it when it happened. In spite of knowing that it was absolutely impossible that she could have done so, I even believed that she had *planned* it that way. Round and round the questions went like the flies endlessly circling round the light bulb above me, and I knew I should never again have peace of mind until I had confronted her with my suspicions and had it out with her once and for all.

So one sultry afternoon late in September back I went to the house in the middle of the wood and knocked on Miss Deazie's door.

"Oh, it's you, lad," she said. "I've been 'a wondering when you'd call round. Come next week, and you'd 'a missed me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Are you going away then?" I asked.

She nodded. "Til Christmas. Mr. Pendlebury'll be keepin' an eye on things for me."

I gazed at her and suddenly it struck me that in all the years I'd known her she hadn't really *aged* at all. apart from her clothes she looked just as she had looked that first time when Gladys Dutton had brought me along to have my warts charmed away. I was the only one of us who had grown older.

She must have read my thought because she laughed and said, "You don't want to go 'a frettin' your poor brain over me, lad, 'Tain't worth the headache. Come along in and we'll sup a glass o' the primrose. It's right lovely this year."

I sat opposite her across the kitchen table and sipped at the golden yellow wine which was as soft and aromatic as the pollen of the flowers she had made it from.

"Isn't that right lovely?" she said. "Tell me true now."

"Yes," I said. "It's lovely."

"Well, what's on your mind, lad?"

I drew in a deep breath, let it out, and said, "I want to know what happened, Miss Deazie."

"Oh, I got them pictures back all right," she said. "I spied them lyin' there all rolled up as neat as you please over the hedge in Carter's medder."

"No, that's not what I mean," I said. "I want to know how you knew about *them* — about Beddoes and Fletcher — and about the raid coming when it did. I want to know what *really* happened. *Please* tell me, Miss Deazie."

She pursed up her lips, regarded me with a sort of speculative sympathy, and then shook her head. "I can't do that, lad," she said. "I dussen't. Not that I'd not be willin' enough on my own account, but 'tisn't mine to tell, see? Never has bin. I'm just 'a holdin' it like for all us Deazies."

"But you did *know*," I said. "About the bomb falling there just when it did. You did, didn't you?"

"Did I?"

I swallowed and then ran my tongue around my lips. "It's something to do with what's in that cupboard, isn't it? That sort of cage thing made of glass?"

"Ah," she said softly. "So you seen that, did you?"

I nodded.

"Then you'm the only one who has, lad, bar us Deazies."

"Did *he* make it?"

"An' who's he?"

"Giovanni."

"Ah. So they do say."

"What does it do, Miss Deazie? Can't you tell me?"

"What does it do?" she repeated. "Why, lad, it's what lets us be Deazies. That's what it *does*. It lets us in and out to do what we do. Now don't you go askin' me no more 'cos I shan't tell 'ee. Reckon I've told you a sight too much

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as it is."

I knew then that I'd got just as far as I was ever going to get, and I think that I realized with some part of me that the kind of answers I was looking for would not have *been* answers at all in my sense of the word. They would all have been looking-glass answers and would never fit the questions of my world.

I drained off my wine, set the glass back on the table and stood up. "You didn't mind my asking, did you, Miss Deazie?"

"No, no, lad," she said. "I didn't mind a bit. I reckon I owed you summat."

She stretched out her hand, touched mine gently and turned it over so that the palm was towards her. She looked down at it and then nodded her head sagely. She didn't say anything.

"All right," I said. "So tell me what you've seen there this time. Go on. You might just as well."

She laughed and patted my hand with her own. "One o' these days, long a'rter I'm gone, you'll be minded to write all this down in a book. But t'won't matter, lad. No one'll ever believe a word on't."

Bargain Back Issues

Every few years we run a special sale on back issues to clear our shelves. Now, for a limited time, we offer:

3 different back issues, 1978-81, for only $3.00

This bargain price includes postage and handling, but the three issues must be our choice; we cannot supply specific issues at this price. If you wish to order specific issues, cost is $2.00 to $2.50 each; please write for free list.

MERCURY PRESS, Inc., PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pat Cadigan ("The Coming of the Doll," June 1981) offers a mordant and surprising tale about a young couple who are about to hook into the wonderful world of pay-TV...

The Day the Martels Got the Cable

BY
PAT CADIGAN

Lydia had stayed home from work to take delivery on the washer and dryer before. So this time David would have Lydia call him in sick and he would wait for the cable TV people to come. Sitting at the kitchen table enjoying the luxury of a second cup of coffee, he skimmed the front page of the newspaper while Lydia hurriedly made herself up in the tiny downstairs bathroom.

"You sure you don't want me to drive you in?" he called over his shoulder.

Lydia poked her head out of the bathroom, holding a mascara brush between two fingers. "Not unless you want the car for some reason. Do you?"

"Nah. I was just thinking though, I always do the driving and you're not really used to the rush-hour traffic. Awake, anyway."

She struck her tongue out at him. "That to you. I was driving in rush hour long before I hooked up with you and I'll be driving in it long after you run off and leave me for a younger woman." She disappeared back into the bathroom.

"*That* will be the day." He got up and went to the doorway of the bathroom. "When I go, I'm taking the car with me."

"Men," Lydia said, staring down at the hand mirror as she worked on her eyelashes. "You're all alike."

"We attend a special school for it when we're young." David looked at her admiringly. She had on what she called her dress-for-success get-up, tailored navy-blue jacket and skirt with a soft white blouse. What the well-dressed board chairperson was wearing this year. David had asked her once if it wasn't a bit overwhelming for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

an office manager. All in fun, of course. Truth to tell, her career was outstripping his own.

He reached out and stopped her as she was about to apply her lipstick. "Sure you don't want me to call you in sick, too? We could wait for the cable people together and then afterwards not watch the movie channel."

"That would look good, wouldn't it?" She gave him a quick but thorough kiss before she put on her lipstick. "I mean, the both of us working at the same company and we both happen to come down with stomach flu — ho, ho — on the same day. They'd buy that, for sure!"

David shrugged. "So? We've got two bathrooms. Two toilets, no waiting. They can send the corporate secret police out to check if they want."

"*David.*"

"I know, I know." He sighed. "It was worth a try."

"Don't think I don't appreciate it." She grinned redly, looking him up and down. "And don't think I'm not tempted. Say, poppa, did anyone tell you you do things for a bathrobe and pajamas that no other man can do?"

"Plenty of women, all the time." He stepped in and posed behind her in the mirror over the sink. They made a perfect portrait of the odd married couple, one with her blonde chin-length hair carefully combed and the other with his tangled hair standing on end and morning stubble shading his cheeks. "Hey, if this were 1956, you'd be the one in the bathrobe, you know."

Lydia looked pained. "Promise me that after we get the cable, you won't tune in Channel 87 in Dry Rot, Egypt, for old *Leave It to Beaver* reruns.

"How about *Ozzie and Harriet?*"

"I *never* liked them." She gave him a push. "Let me out. I gotta go set the world on fire."

David backed up and blocked the doorway. "Last chance, woman. Eight hours of work or sixteen hours of ecstasy — the choice is yours." He made a thrusting motion with his hips.

"Sixteen hours of ecstasy or 26 weeks of paid unemployment. Outta my way, hot pajamas." She honked him as she slipped past and he chased her into the living room.

"Anything I should know about this cable thing?" he asked as she rummaged through her shoulder bag for her car keys.

"Like what?"

"I dunno. You're the one who filled out all the forms and made the arrangements. Am I supposed to do anything with the TV before they get here?"

"Not that I know of." Lydia hooked the keyring around her little finger and pushed several papers back into her purse. "Just stand back and don't get in anybody's way."

David put his hands on his hips. "Well, if they come during Donahue, they're just going to have to *wait!*" He tossed his head.

"I never liked him, either. He's in-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sincere." Lydia offered her cheek for a kiss. Instead, he bit her on the neck and gave her an impertinent squeeze.

"Don't you love permanent press?" he whispered in her ear. "You can do all sorts of things and your clothes never wrinkle."

She poked his ticklish spot and squirmed away. "Try not to eat too many chocolate-covered cherries while you're watching the soaps this afternoon, dear. And be dressed for when the cable people come, will you?"

"Yes, dear," he said nasally. "Honestly, work, work, work — that's all I ever *do* around this place."

Lydia's smile was only half amused. "And take the chicken out to thaw for supper tonight."

"I will."

"I mean it. Don't forget."

"All right, already. I'll take the chicken out to thaw. I was taking chicken out to thaw long before I hooked up with you and I'll be taking it out to thaw long after you run off and leave me to find yourself."

"Just make sure that you do it *today*."

"I will. I *promise*. Now go to work before I rip all your clothes off." He did another bump and grind and she escaped out the door, laughing.

He watched from the living room window as she maneuvered the car out of the cramped parking lot in front of townhouse. Then he went upstairs to take a quick shower, keeping one ear cocked for the sound of the doorbell in case the cable people came early. Why was it cable installers and delivery people could never give you a definite time when they would arrive at your home? They'd just tell you the date and you had to be there. Of course, they didn't come on a Saturday. they worked a straight Monday-to-Friday week, God *forbid* they should arrange their time to accommodate customers with like schedules.

Decadently, he decided not to shave after dressing and went back downstairs to pour himself a fresh cup of coffee and finish the newspaper. At ten o'clock he was fresh out of lazy things to do and just beginning to feel hungry. Well, what the hell — this was a free day. If he wanted to eat lunch early, he could.

The house seemed so quiet, he thought as he flopped down on the couch with a magazine and a sandwich. As he ate, he turned pages without really looking at them. Playing hooky from work wasn't so much fun when there was no one else to share it with.

He laughed at himself. *You sound like an old married man, fella.* An old married man. That wasn't such a bad description, considering whom he was married to. How did that old song go? *Lydia, ho, Lydia* ... something, something. The Marx Brothers had done it in one of their movies, hadn't they?

Lydia. He'd had some kind of industrial-strength good luck going for him when he'd met her. Everything

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had just fallen into place — their relationship had progressed to marriage without missing a beat, and their marriage hadn't had anything missing in three and a half years. Companionship, love, sex, and everything in between — it was all there, just the way he might have imagined it. He *had* imagined it a few times, but in an abstract sort of way. There had been no one he would have filled in the woman's part with until Lydia had come into his life.

Not that he was living some kind of fairy tale, though. They had their problems, they argued, and Lydia had the ability to play the bitch just as well as he could be the bastard. But there was nothing seriously wrong, nothing that threatened them. Hell, he didn't even feel funny about her making more money than he did. They were beyond that kind of macho silliness.

David got up and looked out the window at the parking lot. No sign of the cable truck yet. He supposed they'd come in a truck with all kinds of equipment, ready to plug him into the wonderful world of pay-TV. He'd had a few misgivings about it when Lydia first suggested they subscribe to the cable. The image of himself and Lydia sitting in front of the TV, slaves of the tube and its programming hadn't been terribly appetizing. As a rule, they weren't much for TV watching. But there was the movie channel, and the idea of being able to watch uncut films at home had appealed to him. It would probably make them lazy about getting out to the theaters, but that wouldn't be so bad. During the week they were both tired, and on the weekends they had to fight the crowds — the terminal acne couples, the families with the restless kids and/or squawling babies, and let's not forget the inveterate chatterboxes who seemed to think *they* were in *their* living rooms and couldn't refrain from adding their stupid comments at the tops of their lungs. Yeah, cable TV would be worth it if it would spare them that.

At 11 o'clock when he was already giving thought to having another sandwich, the doorbell rang. "Hallelujah," he muttered and went to answer it.

The small woman smiling up at him on the doorstep had a wild growing-out permanent and a broad, plain face. There was a length of black cable coiled around one shoulder and she held a bag of tools in her hand. "You Mr. Martel?"

He blinked. "Can I help you?"

"Cable-rama. I'm here to put in your cable."

David looked past her, saw the truck sitting in their usual parking place. "Oh. Sure. C'mon in."

The woman gave him a big grin, the skin around her eyes crinkling into a thousand deep lines. "Every time." She walked in, looked around, and went immediately to the television. David hesitated.

"Just you?" he asked. "I mean, did they send you out all by yourself?"

"Every time," she said again and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dropped her tool bag on the carpet.

"Every time what?" David asked, closing the door.

The woman never stopped grinning, even as she rolled the television on its cart out from the wall and knelt behind it. "Every time they open the door and see the cable man's a woman, their mouth falls open. Or they blink a lot." She showed her teeth cheerily. "Like you. They can't believe I can do it all alone."

David felt his face grow slightly warm. "That's not it at all. I just — well, these days you know, sending a woman by herself to people's houses is a risky kind of thing. I mean, times being what they are."

The woman detached the rabbit ears and UHF antenna and set them aside. "Yeah? You mean, like if somebody tries something funny or like that?" She picked up a tool David couldn't imagine a use for, a thing that seemed to be a cross between a wrench and a pair of pliers. "Anybody tries something, I adjust their fine tuning, see?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "They said you guys seemed to be OK."

"Oh, we are. But I thought they'd have to send three, four g— people out to do this."

"Oh, yeah. Back in the early days." She kept working on the back of the televison set as she spoke, occasionally reaching for a different tool or gadget from her bag. "Now it's easy. Someday the technology's gonna get so good, you'll be able to install this stuff yourself. Just click it onto the back of your set or something." She grimaced at the tip of a Phillip's-head screwdriver and wiped it on her workshirt. "You guys into video games?"

David shook his head.

"Ah. That's good. Video games are shit. Burn your goddamn tube out quicker. So do those videotape recorders. Got one of those?"

"No."

"Smart. Then you don't have to go unhooking this and hooking it back up again all the time. Better if you just leave it, unless the set has to go in for servicing."

"I wouldn't know how to remove it anyway."

"S'easy. But best not to fool with it. Play around back here, don't know what you're doing, next thing you know — *zzzzt!* Fried poppa." She raised one eyebrow. "Kids. You got any?"

"Nope."

"Good." I mean, well, you want 'em, you have 'em, I don't care. But if you have any in visiting or anything sometime, don't let them fool with this."

"Zzzzt," said David, smiling.

"You got it." She picked up one end of the cable which she had let slide off her shoulder onto the floor and began connecting it to the back of the television. The other end she screwed into a silvery outlet in the wall. Then she got to her feet. "Gonna play outside for a few minutes now. Don't touch anything. Don't turn the set on, OK?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'll try to get this finished up by the time Donahue comes on."

"We don't like him," David said. "We think he's insincere."

"Suit yourself. Half the women in this town get cable just so they can see him better. It's all the same to me." Still grinning, she stepped over the tools and let herself out.

All delivery and service people, David decided, had to go to some kind of training camp for vocational-quirkiness lessons. Then again, maybe if he made a living connecting people to Donahue, he'd be a character himself. He couldn't wait to tell Lydia about this one. Lydia had thought the two guys who had delivered the washer and dryer had been lunatics.

When the woman hadn't returned for several minutes, he went to the window to check on her. She was standing at the open back of the truck with some kind of meter in her hand. It was attached to a cable that ran out of the truck over the sidewalk and around the side of the house. She seemed to be muttering to herself as she twisted a button or dial on the meter. David raised the window.

"Are you sure you don't need me to turn on the set?" he called.

She looked up at him, startled. "Don't touch it! You didn't touch it, did you? Well, don't! Can't take any power right now; you'll blow up all my equipment!"

"Ok." He left the window up and wandered into the kitchen. Was it considered improper to fix yourself something to eat while a service person who was probably dying for lunch herself was still on the premises? Almost certainly. His stomach growled. He snagged a piece of cheese out of the refrigerator and then crammed the whole thing into his mouth as he heard her come back into the house.

"Almost done," she sang. "Few more adjustments, you're ready for the glory of Living Room Cinema. Trademarked."

He went back to the living room, trying to chew inconspicuously. The woman glanced up at him as she connected wires from a small brown box to the back of the set.

"Ah. Lunch. I'm dyin' for lunch. That's what I'm going for next, you bet." She pushed her frizz back from her forehead. "OK. C'mere. I'm gonna show you."

David swallowed the cheese and wiped his hand across his mouth.

"This here on top is the cable selector. S'got two buttons, A and B. One group of stations is on A, the other's on B. A is simple, mostly the local stations. B is complex — satellite stations and movie channel, sports and news networks, that stuff."

"How do I know what channels to turn to?"

"I'll give you a card before I leave, it's got all that stuff on it. And there's a free program guide. Right now, we wanna see how good it comes in, OK? Great. Go for it and turn her on."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David laughed a little and turned on the television. A game show sprang into life on the screen, looking a bit purple.

"OK. You're on A right now, see? The A button is pushed in. Flip around the dial and let's see everything else."

More game shows, some soap operas and a flurry of commercials flashed on the screen before David returned to the original game show.

"Great picture, huh?" said the woman, tapping his arm lightly with a screwdriver.

"Purple picture."

"You can fix that yourself later. Right now we're just interested in your reception. No snow, no rolling. Great. Isn't that great?"

"It's great," David said. Strange how service people always seemed to crave praise for whatever company they represented. "Do *you* have the cable?"

The woman's eyes widened as though he had asked her about her sex life. "Do I look like someone who would need the cable? Try the B channels. No, keep your hand on the dial, in case you've got to fine tune."

David opened his mouth to tell her there was no fine tuning connected with the channel selector and decided to humor her. Then perhaps she'd take her quirky little self out of his living room faster. He was beginning to tire of her and her jackrabbity conversational style.

He reached up with his left hand and touched the box on top of the TV set. It was warm and tingly on his fingertips, and he almost snatched his hand back. The woman shifted her weight impatiently, and he thumbed down the B button.

Something hot and sizzling jumped into his left hand and shot up his arm. To his horror, he couldn't let go of the box. The hot, sizzling feeling hit his chest and streaked down his other arm before it began to burn through his torso. His last thought, as he turned his head toward the woman, was that she was reacting awfully nonchalantly to the electrocution of one of her customers.

The woman stood staring at David with her arms folded. The fading expression on his face was typical — shock, panic, maybe a little betrayal. Probably thought he was being electrocuted. She'd heard the final connection was something like that, getting fried. *Zzzzt!* She grinned.

When the last bit of emotion had drained from David's face and his eyes had gone opaque, she produced something that might have been a lecturer's metal pointer from her back pocket and stepped around the back of the television again. She did something else to the connections she had made, and the TV screen went dark. David's arms dropped abruptly. The woman punched the A button. "Straighten up," she ordered.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David did so, his head still facing where she had been standing previously. She moved back in front of the TV and twisted the channel selector. David took three steps backwards and bumped into the coffee table.

"Easy there, poppa." She patted her pockets and found the small white card she needed. "Ok. Here we go. Channel 4, right. Channel 5." David held his arms out to his sides as if waiting either to catch someone up in a hug or be crucified. She changed the channel again, and he bent forward at the waist.

"Lotta talent there." The woman flipped through the channels, watching closely as David bent forward at the waist, bobbed up again, combed his hair with his fingers, pinched his nose and opened his mouth. "Siddown on the couch. Stand up. Stand on your left foot." David obeyed, his movements smooth and almost graceful. "O.K. Now the B channels. Do your stuff, poppa."

David walked around the room, turned on a lamp and shut it off again, mimed opening a drawer and searching through some files and danced a few shuffling steps.

"Great reception," the woman said. "One more and you're set." She consulted the card and turned to Channel 9. David did a bump and grind, slow and then fast. "Relax. this is only a test." She laughed and switched back to the A button. He stood motionless again, awaiting instructions. "You're doin' great. Siddown."

David collapsed to the floor cross-legged.

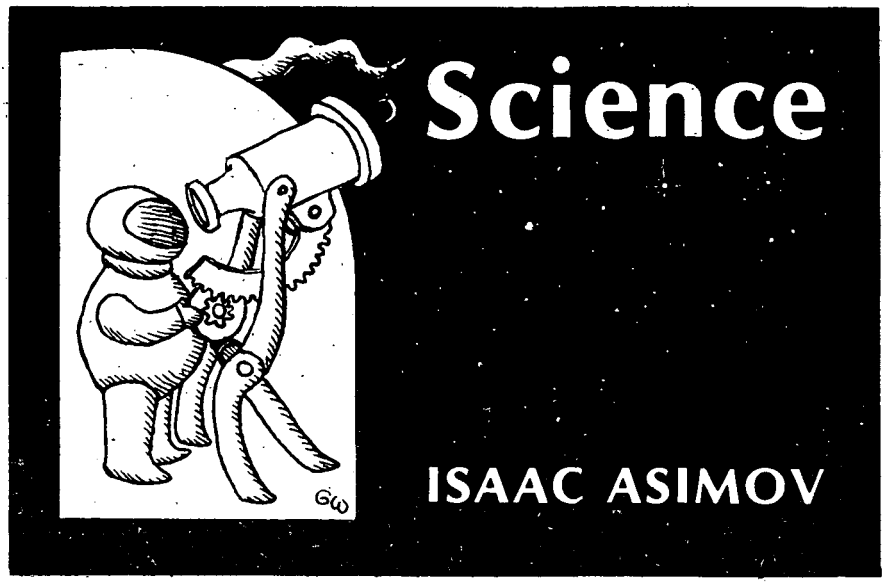
"Oops. Shoulda told you to sit on the couch. Hell. Just stay there. Gonna take care of momma next. After lunch." She went into the kitchen and found the cheese in the refrigerator. She nibbled at it while she got the peanut butter and a loaf of bread out of the cupboad. As an afterthought, she opened a can of black olives.

Lydia Martel was having a carton of strawberry yogurt for lunch at her desk when the phone rang. She dabbed at her lips with a napkin before picking up the receiver.

"Lydia Martel." She paused, sitting back. "Oh, good. Any problems? How's the reception, any static?" She paused again, listening. "Good. Good. Now, how much did you say the installation fee would be? Uh-huh. And the regular monthly charge is what?" She scribbled the figures on a memo pad. "Yes, it *is* reasonable. That includes everything, right?" Lydia laughed a little indulgently. "I *can't* get away before 4:30. — Yes, there *is* something. Put him on vacuum before you leave. He knows where it is, even if he's never touched it. *All* the rooms. After that he can clean up the kitchen, I'm sure he left a mess from lunch. Have him take the chicken out to thaw, I'm positive he forgot.

"And, oh, yes — have him shave, will you? Thanks."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

SILICON LIFE AFTER ALL

Every occupation has its hazards, and my own particular niche in the literary world includes the risk of developing a reputation for omniscience. I am forever finding myself on the edge of being expected to know everything.

I deny the impeachment with a bashful fervor every chance I get. In fact, I have a settled routine for the end of every speech, when the time arrives for questions from the audience. I say, "You may ask me anything at all, for I can answer all questions, if 'I don't know' is counted as one possible answer."

Does it help? No, it doesn't.

In the May 24, 1982 issue of *New York Magazine*, answers were presented for their "Competition 44," in which the readers had been asked for quotations that were considered humorously inappropriate for the "famous person" to which they were ascribed. Among the honorable mentions was:

" 'I don't know.' — Isaac Asimov."

I'm sure that my F & SF essays are a major factor contributing to this misconception, but I can't help that. I have no intention of ever stopping

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these essays for any reasons other than mortality (either my own or the magazine's), and so here goes with my — believe it or not — 290th of the series.

Let's begin with the notion that an electric current travels easily through some substances but not others. A substance which easily carries a current is an "electrical conductor" or, simply, a "conductor." A substance that does not easily carry a current is, almost inevitably, a "non-conductor."

Not all conductors transmit an electric current with equal ease. Any particular substance offers a certain amount of resistance to the passage of current, and the greater the resistance, the poorer the conductor.

Even if we are dealing with only a single substance, fashioned into a wire, we may expect to have different resistances under different circumstances. The longer the wire, the greater the resistance; the smaller the cross-sectional area of the wire, the greater the resistance. (This would also be true of the more familiar situation of water passing through a hollow pipe, so it shouldn't surprise us.)

Suppose, though, that we compare the resistances of different substances, each of which is made into a wire of the same standard length and cross-section and is kept at 0°C. Any difference in resistance would then be entirely due to the intrinsic properties of the substance. It would be the "resistivity" of the substance, and the lower the resistivity, the better the conductor.

Resistivity is measured as so many "ohm-metres," the exact meaning of which is irrelevant right now, and which I won't keep repeating. I shall just give the figures.

Silver is the best conductor known and has the lowest resistivity — 0.0000000152 or 1.52×10^{-8}. Copper is next with a resistivity of 1.54×10^{-8}. Copper has a resistivity only a little over one percent higher than that of silver, and copper is considerably cheaper, so if you care to strip the insulation off a wire used in an electrical appliance, you will find it is copper, and not silver, that forms the wire.

In third place is gold, which is 2.27×10^{-8} (its expense precludes its use), and in fourth place is aluminum with 2.63×10^{-8}.

Aluminum has a resistivity about 70 percent higher than that of copper, but it is so cheap that it is the metal of choice for long-distance transmission of electricity. By making the aluminum wires thicker, their resistance will drop to below that of the usually thinner copper wires; and yet aluminum wires will be less massive than the thin copper wires. Mass for mass, in fact,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

aluminum is the best conductor.

Most metals are fairly good conductors. Even Nichrome, an alloy of nickel, iron, and chromium, which has an unusually high resistivity for a metal, has one of merely 1×10^{-6}. This is 65 times as high as that of copper and makes Nichrome a suitable wire for use in toasters and in heating elements generally. The electric current, forcing its way through the Nichrome, heats it much more than it would heat a copper wire of equivalent size, for the heating effect goes up with resistance, as you might expect.

The reason why metals can conduct electricity comparatively well is that in each metal atom there are usually one or two electrons that are located far out on the atomic outskirts and are therefore loosely held. These electrons can easily drift from atom to atom, and it is that which facilitates easy passage of the electric current.

(The movement of electrons is not quite the same as the flow of electricity. The electrons move rather slowly, but the electrical impulse their motion makes possible travels along the wire at the speed of light.)

In substances in which all the electrons are firmly held in place, so that there is little or no drift from one atom to another, electric current flows very slightly. The substance is a non-conductor and the resistivity is high.

Maple wood has a resistivity of 3×10^{8}; glass one of about 1×10^{12}; sulfur one of about 1×10^{15}; and quartz something like 5×10^{17}. These are outstanding non-conductors.

Quartz has 33 trillion trillion times the resistivity of silver, so that if a quartz filament and a silver wire, of equal length and cross-section, were connected to the same electric source, 33 trillion trillion times as much current would pass through the silver in a given unit of time as would pass through the quartz.

Naturally, there are substances that are intermediate in ability to conduct an electric current. The element germanium has a resistivity of two, and silicon has one of 30,000.

Silicon has a resistivity that is two trillion times as great as that of silver. On the other hand, quartz has a resistivity that is sixteen trillion times as great as that of silicon.

Silicon (which was the subject of my last three essays) has, therefore, a resistivity that is about midway between the extremes of conductors and non-conductors. It is an example of a "semiconductor."

In a previous essay, I explained that of the silicon atom's fourteen electrons, four were on the outskirts and were less tightly held than the rest

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were. In a silcon crystal, however, each of the four outer electrons of a particular silicon atom is paired with one of the outer four of a neighboring atom, and the pair is more tightly held between the two neighbors than a single electron would be. That is why silicon is, at best, only a semiconductor.

The semi-conducting property is at a minimum if all the silicon atoms are lined up perfectly in three-dimensional rank and file so that the electrons are held most tightly. In the real universe, however, crystals are very likely to have imperfections in them, so that somewhere, a silicon atom does not have a neighboring atom appropriately placed, and one of its electrons dangles. The occasional dangling electron increases the conductive power of silicon and contributes disproportionately to its semi-conducting properties.

If you should desire to have an electric current pass through silicon with reasonable ease, you could help by throwing in a few extra electrons. An easy way of doing this is by deliberately adding an appropriate impurity to the silicon, arsenic, for instance.

Each atom of arsenic has 33 electrons, which are divided into four shells. The innermost shell contains two electrons, the next eight, the next eighteen, and the outermost five. It is these outermost five electrons that are most loosely held.

When the arsenic is added to the silicon, the arsenic atoms tend to take their place in the lattice, each one lining up in some random location where, if the silicon were pure, a silicon atom would have been. Four of the outermost electrons of the arsenic atom pair up with those of neighboring atoms, but the fifth cannot, of course. It remains loosely held, and it drifts.

It may manage to find a place here or there, but only at the cost of displacing another electron, which must then proceed to drift. If one end of such a crystal is attached to the negative pole of a battery and the other to a positive pole, the drifting electrons (each of which is negatively charged) will tend to drift away from the negative pole and toward the positive pole. Such an impure silicon crystal is an "n-type semiconductor," the "n" standing for "negative," which is the charge of the drifting electrons.

Suppose, though, that it is a small impurity of boron that is added to the silicon. Each boron atom has five electrons, two in an inner shell and three in an outer one.

The boron atoms line up with the silicon atoms, and each of the three outer electrons pair up with electrons of the silicon neighbors. There is no fourth electron and in its place there is a "hole."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If you attach such a crystal to the negative and positive poles of a battery, the electrons tend to move, when possible, away from the negative and toward the positive pole. This tendency does little good because ordinarily there is nowhere for the electrons to go, but if an electron has a hole between itself and the positive pole, it moves forward to fill it, and, of course, leaves a hole in the place where it was. Another electron fills that hole, which appears in still a new place, and so on.

As the electrons fill the hole in turn, each moving toward the positive pole, the hole moves steadily in the other direction toward the negative pole. In this way, the hole acts as though it were a positively-charged particle so that this type of crystal is termed a "p-type semiconductor," the "p" standing for "positive."

If an n-type semiconductor is attached to a source of alternating current, the excess electrons move in one direction, then the other, then the first, and so on, as the current continually changes direction. The same is true, with the holes moving back and forth, if it is a p-type semiconductor that is in question.

Suppose, though, we have a silicon crystal which has arsenic impurity at one end and boron impurity at the other end. One half of it is n-type and the other half is p-type.

Next imagine that the n-type half is attached to the negative pole of a direct-current battery, while the p-type half is attached to the positive pole. The excess electrons in the n-type half move away from the negative pole to which it is attached and toward the center of the crystal. The holes of the p-type half move away from the positive pole to which it is attached and toward the center of the crystal.

At the center of the crystal, the excess electrons fill the holes and the two imperfections cancel — but new electrons are being added to the crystal at the n-type end, and new holes are being formed at the p-type end as electrons are drawn away. The current continues to pass through indefinitely.

But imagine that the n-type end of the semiconductor is attached to the positive pole of a direct-current battery, and the p-type end is attached to the negative pole. The electrons of the n-type end are attracted to the positive pole to which the end is attached and move to the edge of the crystal away from the center. The holes at the p-type end are attracted to the negative pole and also away from the center. All the electrons and holes move to opposite ends, leaving the main body of the semiconductor free of either, so that an electric current cannot pass through.

An electric current, therefore, can pass through a semiconductor in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

either direction, if the semiconductor is entirely n-type or entirely p-type. If the semiconductor is n-type at one end and p-type at the other, however, an electric current can pass through in one direction, *but not in the other.* Such a semiconductor will allow only half of an alternating current to pass through. A current may enter such a semiconductor alternating, but it emerges direct. A semiconductor that is n-type at one end and p-type at the other, is a "rectifier."

Let us next imagine a semiconductor that has three regions: a left end that is n-type, a central region that is p-type, and a right end that is n-type again.

Suppose that the negative pole of a battery is attached to one n-type end, and the positive pole is attached to the other n-type end. The p-type center is attached to a second battery in such a way that it is kept full of holes.

The negative pole pushes the excess electrons of the n-type to which it is attached away from itself and toward the p-type center. The p-type center attracts these electrons and enhances the flow.

At the other end, the positive pole pulls toward itself the electron excess in the n-type end to which it is attached. The p-type center also pulls at these electrons, however, and inhibits the flow in this half of the crystal.

The p-type center, then, accelerates the flow of electrons on one side of itself, but inhibits it on the other. The overall rate of flow of current can be sharply modified if the extent of positive charge on the central section is shifted.

A small alteration in the charge of the p-type center will result in a large alteration in the overall flow across the semiconductor, and if the charge on the center is made to fluctuate, a similar fluctuation, but a much larger one, is imposed on the semiconductor as a whole. Such a semiconductor is an "amplifier."

Such a three-part semiconductor was first worked out in 1948, and, since it transferred a current across a material that was a resistor (that is, that ordinarily had a high resistance), the new device was called a "transistor." The name was first given it by John R. Pierce (better known to science fiction audiences for the s.f. stories he has written under the name of J. J. Coupling.)

Rectifiers and amplifiers are no strangers to the electronic industry. In fact, radios, record players, television sets, computers, and other such devices, all depend upon them intensely.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

From 1920 to 1950, rectifiers and amplifiers involved the manipulation of streams of electrons forces across a vacuum.

In 1883, the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison was studying ways to make his filaments last longer in the light bulbs he had invented. He tried including a cold metal filament next to the incandescent one in his evacuated bulb. He noted that an electric current flowed from the hot filament to the cold one.

In 1900, a British physicist, Owen W. Richardson showed that when a metal wire was heated, electrons tended to boil out of it in a kind of subatomic evaporation, and that this explained the "Edison effect." (Electrons had not yet been discovered at the time of Edison's observation.)

In 1904, the English electrical engineer, John A. Fleming, worked with a filament surrounded by a cylindrical piece of metal called a "plate" and placed the whole inside an evacuated container. When the filament was connected to the negative pole of a battery, electrons plunged through it, then out across the vacuum into the plate, so that an electric current passed through the system. Of course, the filament gave off electrons more easily as it grew hotter, so Fleming had to wait some time for the filament to grow hot under the push of electrons, before it sprayed them out in sufficiently large quantities to produce a sizable current.

If the filament were connected to the positive pole of a battery, however, electrons were drawn out of the filament and there was nowhere from which replacements could be obtained. They could not be sucked across the battery from a plate that was too cold to yield them. In other words, current could only pass in one direction through the system, which was, therefore, a rectifier.

Fleming called this device a "valve" since it could, in sense, open or close, permitting or shutting off the electron flow. In the United States, however, all such devices came to be called "tubes," because they were hollow cylinders, and since they came to be best known for their use in radios, they were called "radio tubes."

In 1907, the American inventor Lee de Forest included a third element (the "grid") between the filament and the plate. If a positive charge was placed on the grid, the size of the charge proved to have a disproportionate effect on the flow of electrons between filament and plate, and the device became an amplifier.

Radio tubes worked marvelously well in the control of electron flow, but they did have their little weaknesses.

For instance, each radio tube had to be fairly large, since enough vac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

uum had to be enclosed for filament, grid, and plate to be far enough apart so that electrons wouldn't jump the gap until encouraged to do so. This meant that radio tubes were relatively expensive, since they had to be manufactured out of considerable material, and had to be evacuated, too.

Since radio tubes were large, any device using them had to be bulky, too, and could not be made smaller than the tubes they contained. As devices grew more and more sophisticated, more and more tubes (each designed to fulfull a special purpose) were required, and bulkiness became more pronounced.

The first electronic computers had to make use of thousands of radio tubes, and they were, therefore, perfectly enormous.

Then, too, radio tubes were fragile, since glass is brittle. They were also short-lived, since even the tiniest leak would eventually ruin the vacuum; and if not even the tiniest leak existed to begin with, one would surely develop with time. What's more, since the filaments must be kept at high temperatures all the time the tubes were in action, those filaments would eventually break.

(I remember the time in the early 1950's when I first owned a television set, and had to have what amounted to a "live-in" repairman. I dread to think what a small proportion of time a computer would be in true working order, when there would never be time during which some of its tubes would not be going or gone.)

And that's not all. Since the radio-tube filaments had to be maintained at a high temperature whenever working, they were energy-consuming. Moreover, since the device did not work until the filament had attained the necessary high temperature, there was always an irritating "warm-up" period. (Those of us past our first youth well remember that.)

The transistor and its allied devices changed all that, correcting every single one of the deficiencies of radio tubes without introducing any new ones. (Of course, we had to wait for some years after 1948, until techniques were developed that would produce materials of the required purity, and that would deliver the required delicacy of "doping" with added impurities, and yet do it all with sufficient efficiency and reliability to keep the prices low.)

Once the necessary techniques were developed, transistors could replace tubes, and, to begin with, the vacuum disappeared. Transistors were solid throughout, so that they were called, together with a whole family of similar items, "solid-state devices."

Away went fragility and the possibility of leaks. Transistors were much

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more rugged than vacuum tubes could possibly be, and much less likely to fail.

What's more, transistors would work at room temperature, so they consumed much less energy and required no warm-up period.

Most important of all, since no vacuum was required, no bulk was imposed. Small transistors did their work perfectly well, even if there was merely a tiny fraction of a centimeter distance between n-type regions and p-type regions, since the bulk of the material was a far more efficient nonconductor than vacuum was.

This meant that each vacuum tube could be replaced by a far smaller solid-state device. This first entered the general consciousness when computers came to be "transistorized," a term quickly replaced by the far more dramatic "miniaturized."

Computers shrank in size and so did radios. We can slip radios and computers into our pockets now.

Television sets would be miniaturized, too, but we don't want to shrink the picture tubes. That same desire to keep a sizable picture tube limits the shrinkage possibilities of word processors and other forms of computerized television screens.

Over the past quarter-century, indeed, the main thrust of computer development has been in the direction of making solid-state devices smaller and smaller, using ever more delicate junctions, and setting up individual transistors that are quite literally microscopic in size.

In the 1970's, the "microchip" came into use, a tiny square of silicon, a couple of millimetres long on each side, upon which thousands of solid-state-controlled electrical circuits could be etched by electron beams.

It is the microchip that has made it possible to squeeze enormously versatile capabilities into a little box. It is the microchip that has made pocket computers not only so small in size, but able to do much more than the giant computers of a generation ago — while costing next to nothing, too, and virtually never requiring repairs.

The microchip has also made the industrial robot possible.

Even the simpliest human action, requiring judgment, is so complex that it would be impossible to have a machine do it without including some sort of substitute for that judgment.

Suppose, for instance, you were trying to get a machine to perform the task of tightening bolts (which drove Charlie Chaplin insane in the movie "Modern Times" simply because the task was too simple and repetitive for a human brain to manage it for long).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The task seems so simple that even a human brain of less-than-average capacity can do it without thinking, but consider—

You must see where the bolt is, reach it quickly, place a wrench upon it in the proper orientation, turn it quickly to the proper tightness, notice, meanwhile, whether the bolt is seated properly on the screw and correct it if it is not, tell whether it is a defective bolt or not, discarding and replacing it if is, and so on.

By the time you try to build the necessary capacities into an artifical arm in order to get it to duplicate all the things a human being does without any realization of how difficult a task he is performing, you would end up (prior to 1970) with a device that would be totally impractical, and incredibly bulky and expensive — if it could be done at all.

With the coming of the microchip, however, all the necessary details of judgment could be made compact enough and cheap enough to produce useful industrial robots.

Undoubtedly, we can expect this trend to continue. People who are working on robots these days are concentrating chiefly in two directions: on supplying them with the equivalent of sight, and on making it possible for them to respond to human speech and to speak in return.

A robot that can see, hear, and speak will certainly move a giant step closer to seeming "alive" and "intelligent."

It is clear, moreover, that what will make a robot seem alive and intelligent will be one thing, and one thing only — the microchip. Without the solid-state devices that lend it its abilities and sense of judgment, a robot would be merely a rather intricate lump of metal, wires, insulation and so on.

And what is the microchip, stripped to its essentials? Slightly impure silicon, just as the human brain is essentially slightly impure carbon.

We are now heading, I believe, toward a society composed of two broad types of intelligence, so different in quality as to be non-competing in any direct sense; each merely supplementing the other. We will have human beings with carbon-based brains, and robots with silicon-based brains. More generally, we will have carbon-life and silicon-life.

To be sure, the silicon-life will be human-made and will be what we call "artificial intelligence," but what difference does that make?

Even if there is no possibility that what we think of as natural silicon-life can evolve anywhere in the Universe, there will still be silicon-life after all.

And if you stop to think of it, silicon-life will be as natural as carbon-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

life is, even if silicon-life was "manufactured." After all, there is more than one way to "evolve."

It might well seem to us that the whole function of the Universe was to evolve carbon-life; and to a robot, it might well seem that the whole function of carbon-life, in turn, was to develop a species capable of devising silicon-life. Just as we consider carbon-life infinitely superior to the inanimate Universe out of which it arose, a robot might argue that—

But never mind that; I dealt with that point in my story "Reason," which I wrote forty-two years ago.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

If you are planning a change of address please notify us as far in advance as possible, and allow six weeks for the change to become effective.

Be sure to give us both your old and new address, including the zip codes. Print clearly and, if possible, attach an old mailing label.

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____
(please print)

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,
Mercury Press, Inc., PO Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This is Tim Powers first story in F&SF, but he is the author of three novels: THE SKIES DISCROWNED, EPITAPH IN RUST (1976) and THE DRAWING OF THE DARK (1979). He is thirty years old and lives in Santa Ana with his wife, Serena.

The Way Down the Hill

BY
TIM POWERS

"Then I was frightened at myself, for the cold mood
That envies all men running hotly, out of breath,
Nowhere, and who prefer, still drunk with their own blood,
Hell to extinction, horror and disease to death."

—George Dillon, from the French of Charles Baudelaire

I hadn't been to the place since 1961, but I still instinctively downshifted as I leaned around the curve, so that the bike was moving slowly enough to take the sharp turn off the paved road when it appeared. The old man's driveway was just a long path of rutted gravel curling up the hillside, and several times I had to correct with my feet when the bald back tire lost traction, but it was a clear and breezy afternoon, with the trees and the tan California hillside making each other look good, and I was whistling cheerfully as I crested the hill and parked my old Honda beside a couple of lethal-looking Harley-Davidsons.

I was late. The yard spread out in front of the old man's Victorian-style house was a mosaic of vans, Volkswagons, big ostentatious sedans, sports cars and plain anonymous autos. There were even, I noticed as I stuffed my gloves into my helmet and strode up to the front steps, a couple of skateboards leaning on the porch rails. I grinned and wondered who the kids would be.

The heavy door was pulled open before I could touch the knob, and Archie was handing me a foaming Carlsberg he'd doubtless fetched for someone else. Somehow I can always recognize Archie.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Come in, sibling!" he cried jovially. "We certainly can't expect Rafe yet, so you must be Saul or Amelia." He studied my face as I stepped inside. "Too old to be Amelia. Saul?"

"Right," I said, unknotting my scarf. "How's the old man, Arch?"

"Never better. He was asking just a few minutes ago if you'd showed up yet. Where the hell have you been, anyway, for ... how many years?"

"Twenty — missed the last three meetings. Oh, I've been wandering around. Checked out Europe one more time and took a couple of courses back east before the old boredom effect drifted me back here. Living in Santa Ana now." I grinned at him a little warily. "I imagine I've got a lot of catching up to do."

"Yeah. Did you know Alice is gone?"

I tossed my helmet onto a coat-buried chair, but kept my leather jacket because all my supplies were in it. "No," I said quietly. I'd always liked Alice.

"She is. Incognito underground, maybe — but more likely..." He shrugged.

I nodded and took a long sip of the beer, grateful for his reticence. Why say it, after all? People do let go sometimes. Some say it's hard to do, as difficult as holding your breath till you faint — others say it's as easy as not catching a silver dollar tossed to you. Guesses.

Archie ducked away to get another beer, and I walked across the entry hall into the crowded living room. The rich, leathery smell of latakia tobacco told me that old Bill was there, and I soon identified him by the long, blackened meerschaum pipe he somehow found again every time. The little girl puffing at it gave me a raised eyebrow.

"Howdy, Bill," I said. "It's Saul."

"Saul, laddie!" piped the little girl's voice. "Excuse the nonrecognition. You were a gawky youth when I saw you last. Been doing anything worthwhile?"

I didn't even bother to give the standard negative reply. "I'll talk to you later," I said. "Got to find something for this beer to chase."

Bill chuckled merrily. "They laid in a dozen bottles of Laphroaig scotch in case you came." He waved his pipe toward the dining room that traditionally served as the bar. "You know your way down the hill."

It was a long-standing gag between us, deriving from one night when a girlfriend and I had been visiting a prominent author whose house sat on top of one of the Hollywood hills; the girlfriend had begun stretching and yawning on the couch and remarking how tired she was, and the prominent author obligingly told her she could spend the night right there. Turning briefly toward me, he inquired, "You know your way down the hill, don't you?" Bill and I now used the phrase to indicate any significant descent. I smiled as I turned toward the bar.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I stiffened, though, and my smile unkinked itself, when I saw a certain auburn-haired girl sipping a grasshopper at a corner table.

I could feel my face heat up even before I was sure I recognized her. It hadn't been long ago, a warm August evening at the Orange Street Fair, with the blue and rose sky fading behind the strings of light bulbs that swayed overhead. I'd been slouched in a chair in the middle of Glassell Street, momentarily left in a littered clearing by an ebb in the crowd. The breeze was from the south, carrying frying smells from the Chinese section on Chapman, and I was meditatively sipping Coors from a plastic cup when she dragged up another chair and straddled it.

I don't remember how the conversation started, but I know that through a dozen more cups of beer we discussed Scriabin and Stevenson and David Bowie and A. E. Houseman and Mexican beers. And later she perched sidesaddle (because one of the passenger foot-pegs fell off long ago) on the back of my motorcycle as I cranked us through the quiet streets to my apartment.

She went out for a newspaper and ice cream the next afternoon, and never came back. I'd been wryly treasuring the memory, in a two-ships-that-pass-in-the-night way, until now.

Restraining my anger, I crossed to her table and sat down. The girl's face looked up and smiled, obviously recognizing me.

"Hello, Saul."

"God damn it," I gritted. "All right, who are you?"

"Marcus. Are you upset? Why? Oh, I know! I still owe you for that newspaper." Marcus started digging in his purse.

"Less of the simpering," I snapped. "You knew it was me?"

"Well, sure," he said. "What's wrong? I broke an *unwritten law* or something? Listen, you haven't been around for a while. Customs change, ever notice? What's wrong with members of the clan having relations with each other?"

"Christ. Lots of things," I said hoarsely. Could the old man have sanctioned this? "It makes me sick." I could remember going bar-hopping with Marcus in the 1860's when he was a bearded giant, both of us drunkenly prowling the streets of Paris, hooting at women and trading implausible and profane reminiscences.

"Don't run off." Marc caught me by the arm as I was getting up. "There are few things I've got to tell you before the dinner ceremony at six. Sit down. Laphroaig still your drink? I'll get a bottle—"

"Don't bother. I want to go talk to the old man. Save whatever you've got to say until the meeting."

"It's old Hain I want to talk about. You've got to hear this sooner or later, so—"

"So I'll hear it later," I said, and strode out of the bar to find Sam Hain,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

our patriarch. I'd been there only about five minutes, but I was already wishing I hadn't come. If this was the current trend, I thought, I can't blame Alice for disappearing.

Back in the high-ceilinged living room I caught the eye of a little boy who was pouring himself a glassful of Boodle's. "Where's our host?" I asked.

"Library. Amelia?"

"Saul. Robin?" Robin was always fond of good gin.

"Right. Talk to you later, yes?" He wandered off toward the group around the piano.

From the corner of my eye I saw Marcus — who'd put on a bit of weight since that night, I noted with vindictive satisfaction — hurry out of the bar. I braced myself, but he just crossed to the entry and thumped away up the stairs. Doubtless in a snit, I thought.

I pictured old Marc sniffling and dabbing at his mascara'd eyes with a perfumed hankie, and shook my head. It always upset me to consider how thoroughly even the keenest-edged minds are at the mercy of hormones and such biological baggage. We are all indeed windowless gonads, as Leibnitz nearly said.

Old Sam Hain was asleep in his usual leather chair when I pushed open the library door, so I sipped my beer and let my eyes rove over the shelves for a minute or two. As always, I envied him his library. The quarto *Plays of Wharfinger, Ashbless' Odes,* Blaylock's *Wild Man of Tanga-Raza,* all were treasures I'd admired for decades — though, at least in a cursory glance, I didn't notice any new items.

I absently reached for the cigar humidor, but my fingers struck polished table-top where it should have been. Suddenly I noticed an absence that had been subconciously nagging at me ever since I'd arrived — the house, and the library particularly, was not steeped in the aroma of Caribbean cigars anymore.

Behind me the old man grunted and raised his head. "Saul?"

"Yes sir." It never failed to please me, the way he could always recognize me after a long separation. I sat down across the table from him. "What's become of the cigars?"

"Ahh," he waved his hand, "they began to disagree with me." He squinted spectulatively at me. "You've been away twenty years, son. Have you, too, begun to disagree with me?"

Embarrassed and a little puzzled, I shifted in my chair. "Of course not, sir. You know I just wander off for a while sometimes — I missed four or five in a row at the end of the last century, remember? Means nothing. It's just to indulge my solitary streak once in a while."

Hain nodded and pressed his fingertips together. "Such impulses should be resisted — I think you know that. We are a clan, and our potentially great power is ... vitated if we persist in operating as individuals."

I glanced at him sharply. This

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seemed to be an aboutface from his usual opinions — more the kind of thing I'd have expected from Marcus or Rafe.

"Ho. It sounds as if you're saying we should go back to the way we were in the days of the Medicis — or as Balzac portrayed us in *The Thirteen*." I spoke banteringly, certain he'd explain whatever he'd actually meant.

"I've been doing some deep thinking for a number of years, Saul," he said slowly, "and it seems to me that we've been living in a fantasy daydream since I took over in 1861 and made such drastic changes in traditional clan policy. They were well-intentioned changes, certainly — and in a decent world they'd be practical. But we're not living in a decent world, ever notice? No, I no longer think our isolation and meek, live-and-let-live ways are realistic. Ah, don't frown, Saul. I know you've enjoyed this last hundred and twenty years more than any other period ... but surely you can see you've — we've all — been ignoring certain facts? What do you think would happen if the ephemerals ever learned of our existence?"

"It wouldn't matter," I cried, unhappily aware that I was taking the side he'd always taken in this perennial question. "They'd kill some of us, I suppose, but we've all had violent deaths before. I prefer quick deaths to slow ones anyway. Why can't we just have them alone? *We're* the parasites, after all."

"You're talking rot," he snapped. "Do you really think killing us is the worst they could do? What about perpetual maintenance on an artificial life-support system, with *no* means of suicide? What about administering mind-destroying drugs, so you spend the rest of your incarnations drooling and cutting out paper dolls in one half-wit asylum after another? And even if you could get to your suicide kit or jump in the way of a car before they seized you ... do you think it's still absolutely impossible for them to track a soul to its next host?"

"I don't know," I muttered after a pause. In spite of my convictions his words had shaken me, touching as they did our very deepest fears. Maybe he's right, I thought miserably. We *are* parasites — all the liquor and food and music and poetry we enjoy is produced by the toiling ephemerals — but surely even parasites have to defend themselves?

"Saul," he said kindly, "I'm sorry to rub your nose in it this way, but you see we have to face it. Go have a drink and mix with the siblings; this will all be discussed after dinner. By the way, have you talked to Marcus?"

"Briefly."

"Talk to him at more length, then. He's got something important to tell you before the meeting."

"Can you tell me?"

"Let him. Relax, it's good news. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll finish my nap. It seems to be ripening to a real

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alexandrian feast out there, and if it's going to last on into tomorrow I'd best catch some shut-eye."

"Right, sir."

I closed the door as I left, and went back to the bar, slumping into the same chair I'd had before. Archie was tending bar now, and I called my order to him, and when it arrived I tossed back a stiff gulp of the nearly-warm scotch and chased it with a long draft of icy Coors.

Being a member of the clan, I was used to seeing cherished things come and go — "This, too, will pass" was one of our basic tenets — but the old man had, in only a hundred and twenty years, become a rock against the waves of change, an immortal father, a symbol of values that outlast individual lifetimes. But now *he* had changed.

One corner of my mind was just keening. Even *this*, it wailed, even *this* will pass?

I remembered the meeting at which he'd first appeared, on a chilly night in 1806 at Rafe's Boston mansion. Sam was then a boy of about ten, and though he knew everyone and greeted the mature ones by name, he never did say who he'd been before. This upset a lot of us, but he was cordially firm on that point; and we couldn't deduce it by a process of elimination, either — a number of siblings had suicided in the early 1790's, after the tantalizingly-hopeful French Revolution had degenerated into the Terror, and several apparently let go, never came back. There was, of course, a lot of speculation about which one he was ... though a few whispered that he wasn't any one of our lost siblings, but a new being who'd somehow infiltrated us.

The crowd in the bar slacked off. Most of the clan had carried their drinks out into the back yard, where the barbeque pit was already flinging clouds of aromatic smoke across the lawn, and the dedicated drinkers who remained were now working more slowly, so Archie came out from behind the bar and sat down at my table.

"Have a drink, Archimago," I said.

"Got one." He waved a tequila sour I hadn't noticed.

I took a long sip of the Laphroaig. "Are we all present and accounted for?"

"Nearly. The count's at forty these days now that Alice is gone — and there are thirty-eight of us here. Not a bad turnout."

"Who's missing?"

"Amelia and Rafe. Amelia's currently a man, about forty years old. Maybe she killed herself. And of course Rafe just died two months ago, so we can't expect to see him for another decade."

"How'd he go this time?" I didn't care, really. Marcus and Rafe were fast friends, but though in some incarnations I liked Marcus, I could never stand Rafe.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Shot himself through the roof of the mouth in his apartment on Lombard Street in San Francisco. Nobody was surprised, he was nearly forty." Archimago chuckled. "They say he managed to pull the trigger twice."

I shrugged. "If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing thoroughly," I allowed.

Archie looked across the room and got to his feet. "Ah, I see Vogel is out of akkavit. Excuse me."

Most of us choose to die at about forty, to ride the best years out of a body and then divorce ourselves from it by means of pills or a bullet or whatever strikes our fancy, so that our unencumbered soul can — though we rarely talk about it — dart through the void to the as yet unfirmly-rooted soul of some unborn child, which we hungrily thrust out into the darkness, taking its embryonic body for ourselves. It sounds horrible baldly stated, and there's a mournful ballad called "The Legion of Lost Children" which none of us ever even hums, though we all know it, but it's hard to the point of impossibility to stare into that final, lightless abyss, and feel yourself falling, picking up speed ... and *not* grab the nearest handhold.

Sam Hain, though, seemed to be an exception to this. He was born in mid 1796 and never died once after that, somehow maintaining his now one-hundred-and-eighty-five-year-old body on red wine, sashimi, tobacco and sheer will power. His physical age made him stand out among us even more than the obscurity of his origin did, and being patient, kindly and wise as well, he was elected Master at our 1861 meeting.

Up until then the Master post had meant little, and carried no duties except to provide a house and bountiful food and liquor for the five-yearly meetings. I was Master myself for several decades in the early part of the sixteenth century, and some of the clan never did find out — or even ask — who the host of the meetings was. Sam Hain, though, made changes: for one thing, he arbitrarily changed the date of the meetings from the thirty-first of October to November first; he began to cut back on the several vast, clan-owned corporations that provide us all with allowances; and he encouraged us to get more out of a body, to carry it, as he certainly had, into old age before unseating some unborn child and taking its fresh one. I believe it was Sam, in fact, who first referred to us all as "hermit crabs with the power of eviction."

I looked up from my drink and saw Marcus enter the bar and signal Archie. The alcohol had given me some detachment toward the whole business, and I admitted to myself that Marc had certainly drawn a good body this time — tall and slender with cascades of lustrous coppery hair. I could no longer be attracted to it, but I could certainly see why I'd been so entranced at the street fair.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hello, Marc," I said levelly. "Sam says you've got some good news for me."

"That's right, Saul." He sat down just as Archie brought him his creamy, pale green drink, and he took a sip before going on. "You're going to be a father."

For several moments I stared at him blankly. I finally choked, "That night...?"

He nodded, grinning, and fished from his purse a slip of folded paper. "Tested out positive."

"God damn you," I said softly. "Was it for this that you picked me up in the first place?"

He shrugged. "Does it matter? I should think our main concern at this point is the welfare of the child."

Though sick and cold inside, I nodded, for I saw the teeth of the trap at last — if one of us dies while in physical contact with a pregnant woman, it is her fetus that that one will take. And though we of the clan can generally have children, the hermit-crab reincarnation ability doesn't breed true — our children are all ephemerals.

"A hostage to fortune," I said. "You're holding my unborn child for ransom, right? Why? What do I have that you want?"

"You catch on fast," Marc said approvingly. "Okay, listen — if you cooperate with me and a couple of the others, I'll allow your child to be born, and you can take it away or put it up for adoption or whatever. We'll even triple your allowance, and you don't use more than half of it now." He had another sip of his disgusting drink. "Of course, if you *don't* cooperate, one of the clan is likely to die while holding my hand, and ... well, the Legion would have one more squalling member."

I didn't flinch at the reference to the strictly-tabooed song, for I knew he'd hoped to shock me with it. "Cooperate? In what?"

He spread his hands. "Something I don't think you'd object to anyway. The, uh," he patted his abdomen, "hostage is just insurance. Would you like a fresh drink? I thought so. Arch! Another boiler-maker here. Well, Saul, you've heard the good news — take it easy! — and now I'm afraid I've got some bad." He just sat and watched me until I'd had a sip of the new drink.

"Sam Hain is dead," he said, very quietly. "He blew his head off, in this house, late in 1963. Please don't interrupt! Rafe and I found his body only a few hours afterward, and came to a decision you might disapprove of — the next meeting wasn't for three years, so we had one of the secret, advanced branches of our DIRE Corporation construct a simulacrum."

I opened my mouth to call him a liar, but closed it again. I realized I was certain it was true. "What does smoke do, clog the thing's circuits or something?"

He nodded. "It's rough on the deli-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cate machinery, so we had him give up the cigars, as you noticed. It was me speaking to you through the simulacrum, from the controls upstairs."

"I saw you run out of the bar." Marc started to speak, but I interrupted him. "Wait a minute! You said '63? That can't be — he'd be ... eighteen now, and he'd be here today. If this is—"

Marc took my hand. "He *would* be eighteen, Saul. If he came back ... but he didn't. He let go. We were pretty sure he would, or we wouldn't have gone to the trouble of having the sim built."

I jerked my hand away. I didn't doubt him — Sam Hain was just the sort who'd choose to drop away into the last oblivion rather than cheat an unborn child of his life — but I wanted no intimacy with Marc.

"All right, so you've got this robot to take his place. Why involve me in—"

I broke off my sentence when a dark-haired man with a deeply-lined face lurched into the bar; his tie was loose, his jacket looked slept in, and he'd clearly been doing some preliminary drinking elsewhere. "Who's doling out the spirits here?" he called.

Archimago waved to him. "Right here, Amelia. We didn't think you were going to show. What'll you have?"

"Ethanol." Amelia wove with drunkard dignity across the room and ceremoniously collapsed into the third chair at our table. "Okay if I join you? Who are you, anyway?"

I overrode Marc's brushing-off excuses, wanting some time to consider what he'd been saying. "Sure, keep your seat, Amelia. I'm Saul, and this is Marcus."

"Yeah," Amelia said, "I know. I visited Marc last year at his apartment in Frisco. Still living there, Marc? Nice little place, on that twisty street and all. 'Member that night we drove to—"

"You're late," Marcus said coldly, "and drunk. Why is that?"

Amelia's eyes dulled, and though her expression grew, if anything, more blank, I thought she was going to cry. "I had a stop to make this morning, a visit, before coming here."

Marc rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "This *morning*? Where, in New York?"

Archie brought a glass of some kind of whiskey, and Amelia seized it eagerly. "In Costa Mesa," she breathed, after taking a liberal sip. "Fairview State Mental Hospital."

"I hope they didn't say they were too full to take you," Marc said sweetly.

"Shut up, Marc," I said. "Who were you visiting?"

"My ... fiancé, from my last life," Amelia said, "when I was a woman."

The incongruity of a woman talking out of a man's body rarely bothered me, but it did now.

"He's seventy-two years old," she went on. "White hair, no teeth ... a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

face like a desert turtle."

"What's he doing in the hatch?" Marc inquired.

His sarcasm was lost on the inward-peering Amelia. "We were engaged," she said, "but we got into a fight one evening. This was in 1939. I'd gone out to dinner with a guy I'd met at a party, and Len said I shouldn't have. I was drunk, of course, and I laughed and told him ... the truth, that I'd slept around long before I met him, and would be doing it long after he was dead."

"Can this romance be saved?" said Marc, looking tremendously bored.

"Anyway, he belted me. First time ... only time ... he ever did. God I was mad. I can't now, as a man, *imagine* being that mad. So you know what I did? I went into the kitchen and got a big knife out of the drawer and, while he stood there muttering apologies, I shoved the blade up to the handle into my stomach. And I pulled it out and laughed at him some more and called him every filthy name I knew, for three whole goddamned hours, as I lay there on the floor and bled to death. He never moved. Well, he sat down."

Even Marc was looking a little horrified. "I don't wonder the poor bastard's in Fairview now," he said. "And you *visited* him?"

"Yeah. I forget why. I think I wanted to apologize, though I was a thirty-year-old woman when he last saw me ... I told them I was a relative, and quoted enough family history to get in." She took another big sip of the whiskey. "He was in a little bed, and his dried-up body didn't raise the blankets any more than what a couple of brooms would. I was looking respectable, freshly shaved, dressed like you see, smiling ... and yet he *knew* me, he recognized me!" Amelia gulped her whole drink. "He started yelling and crying and, in his birdy old voice, begging me to *forgive* him." She grinned, her man's face wrinkling. "Can you beat that? Forgive him."

"Absolutely fascinating," pronounced Marcus, slapping the table. "Now why don't you go find somebody else to tell it to, hmm? Saul and I have to talk."

"I want to talk to the old man," said Amelia weakly as she got to her feet and tottered away.

"Oh, God," Marc moaned, exasperated.

"Hadn't you better dash upstairs again?" I suggested. "With no one at the sim's controls she'll think it's a corpse."

"No," he said, staring after Amelia, "it's equipped to run independently, too. Speaks vague platitudes and agrees with nearly everything that's said to it Oh well, she's too lushed to notice anything. Okay now, listen, Saul, you started to ask why we dragged you in on this — I'll tell you, and then you can call me a son of a bitch, and then do what I ask, and then, if you want, take the hostage when it shows up and disappear and never come back. As I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say, you and the kid will be financially provided for.

"Through the simulacrum, Rafe and I have been gradually changing clan policy, restoring things to the way they were before Hain took over in 1861. DIRE is going to resume the genetic and conditioning researches Hain made them stop in the 1950's, and, oh, we've bought and cultivated acres of farmland near Ankara for ... certain lucrative enterprises he would never have permitted, and — anyway, you see? As a matter of fact, we hope soon to be able to maintain a farm of healthy perpetually-pregnant ephemerals, so that we can have our deaths performed under controlled conditions and be sure the fetus we move on to is a healthy, well-cared-for one. Honestly, wouldn't it be nice not to find yourself born in slums anymore? Not to have to pretend to be a child for a dreary decade until you can leave whatever poor family you elbowed your way into? And we can begin taking hormone injections quite young, to bring us more quickly to a mature—"

Suddenly I was sorry I'd had so much to drink. "That's filthy," I said. "All of it. More abominable than ... than I can say."

He pursed his painted lips. "I'm sorry you can't approve, Saul. We'd hoped your long absence was a sign of dissatisfaction with the way things were. But with our ... hostage to fortune, as you put it, we don't need your approval. Just your cooperation. Some siblings have commented on the changes in the old man, and we can't afford to have them even suspect that what they see is a phony. If they knew he was gone it would be impossible to get them to work together, or even allow ... Anyway, if they all see *you*, Sam's traditional favorite, drinking with the old man and reminiscing and laughing and agreeing with everything that comes out of his mouth, why, it'll be established in their minds, safely below the conscious level, that this is certainly the genuine Sam Hain they've unquestionably obeyed for more than a century."

"You want me to kiss him?"

Marc frowned, puzzled. "That won't be necessary. Just friendly, like you've always been. And of course, if you don't, then I'll go hold Amelia's hand in one of mine and," he patted his purse, "blow her head off with the other. And then it'll be her I give birth to in six months. Maybe she'd even be able to visit that poor son of a bitch at Fairview again, as a baby this time."

"I know, I know," I told him impatiently. "I comprehended the threat the first time. Shut up and let me think."

I've had a number of children, over the centuries, and they're all as dead-and-gone as Marc was threatening to make this one. It never bothered me much, even when, in a few cases, I'd actually seen them die — they'd had their little lives, and their irreversible deaths. And of course the ... eviction

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of unborn babies from their bodies, though not a concept I was really at ease with, was anything but a new one to me. Still ... I didn't want a child of mine to get just alive enough to die and then be pushed away to sink into the dark. "They give birth astride a grave," Beckett said, "the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." That's how it is for the ephemerals, certainly. But let them have that instant's gleam of light!"

"All right," I said dully. "If Sam's gone, I don't care what becomes of you all anyway. I'll take the kid and go incognito underground."

"The wisest choice," approved Marcus with a grin that brought out smile lines in his cheeks. What, I wondered, would this girl have been like today, if Marc hadn't taken over her embryonic body years ago? Perhaps we'd still have met at the street fair, and talked about Stevenson.

It took me a few seconds to stand up, and I heard my chair clatter over behind me, but I felt coldly sober. "Trot upstairs and get in the driver's seat," I said. "I'd like to get home by midnight."

"Archimago will run the sim," Marc said, giving a thumbs-up to Archie, who nodded and strode out of the bar without looking at me.

"I'm going to take a walk out back," I said. "Clear the fumes out of my head ... and give your wind-up man time to join the others ahead of me. You don't want this to look rehearsed."

"I suppose not. Okay, but don't wander off or anything."

"You're holding the stake," I reminded him.

Scattered between the house and the backdrop of trees silhouetted against the darkening sky, my siblings were beginning to deal with dinner. The fire-pit blazed fiercely, seeming to lack only a bound martyr for some real nostalgia, and the crowd, as if to supply it, was dragging up a whole side of beef wired to a revolving black iron frame. They'd got into the cellar, and I picked my way through a litter of half-empty Latour and Mouton bottles on my way to the unlighted, vine-roofed patio on the west side of the house.

After dark we of the clan generally prefer noisy, bright-lit groups to solitude, and I wasn't surprised to find the deep-shadowed patio empty. I fished a cigarette from my left jacket pocket and struck a match on the side of the bench I was sitting on, and drew a lungful and then let the smoke hiss out and flit away on the cool, eucalyptus-scented breeze.

I stared at the dark bulk of the old house and wondered where its master was buried. Though it was like Sam to have let go, I blamed him for having killed himself. Surely he must have known we'd slide back into our old, ruthless ways once he was gone, like domesticated dogs thrown back out into the wilderness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A dim green glow defined a window in the third story, near where several heavy cables were moored to the shingles. Doubtless the room, I thought, where Archie is hunched over whatever sort of controls a simulacrum requires. I picked a loose chip from one of the flagstones and cocked my arm to pitch it at the window — then sadly decided the move would be a mistake, and let it fall back to the payment instead.

I was aware that it would be quite a while before I'd know whether Marc had kept his end of the bargain. I shook my head and flicked away the cigarette. Marc and his crew were maneuvering me around — from the seduction three months ago to the curt orders of tonight — like a scarecrow, no more independent than their mechanical Sam Hain. Predictable is what you are, I told myself bitterly, and as helplessly useful as one of those keys for opening sardine cans.

Before I knew what I was doing I found myself standing on the seat of the concrete bench and gripping one of the horizontal beams that the vine trellises were nailed to. By God, I thought, I'll at least give Archie a scare, make him tangle the puppet strings a little. I chinned myself up and, driving my legs through the brittlely-snapping trellis, jacknifed forward and wound up sitting on the beam, brushing dust, splinters and bits of ivy from my hair.

I stood up on the beam cautiously. It dipped here and there, but took my weight without coming unmoored, and and in a moment I had flapped and tottered my way to the house wall, and steadied myself by grabbing a drainpipe that, overhead, snaked right past the window I wanted to get to. Not wanting to lose my drunken impetus, I immediately swarmed up it in my best rock-climbing style, leaving most of the skin of my palms on the rough seams of the pipe.

I reached the level of the dim green window and braced a foot on one of the pipe's brackets; then I leaned sideways, gripped the window sill and made a fearsome wide-eyed, open-mouthed face while scrabbling at the glass with the nails of my free hand.

There was no response — just an uninterrupted, muted hum of machinery. I banged the pane with my forehead and made barking sounds. Still nothing.

I was beginning to get irritable. I dug in my right jacket pocket and pulled out the compact but heavy pistol I always kept there, and knocked in the glass. There were a few glass splinters in the frame when I was done, but I knew my leather jacket would protect me from them.

I brought my other hand quickly to the sill, heaved, and dove into the room, landing on my fingertips and somersaulting across a linoleum floor.

"I'll take over the controls, Arch," I gasped, springing to my feet. "How do you make the thing do a jig? Or—"

I stopped babbling. The room was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

empty except for a long plastic case on the floor, about three feet deep and connected by tubes to a bank of dimly illuminated dials on one wall.

I sagged. My only concern at this point was to get out of there without having to answer any questions as to why I had thought it worth my while to break into what was doubtless the room housing the building's air-conditioning unit. I hurried toward the metal door in the far wall, but jerked to a halt when I peripherally glimpsed a face under the curved plastic surface of that suddenly-recognizable-as-coffin-sized case.

Sweat sprang out of my temples — I was afraid I'd recognized the face, and I didn't want to look again and confirm it. You didn't see anything, my mind assured me. Go rejoin the party.

I think I'd have taken its advice if its tone hadn't been so like Marc's.

I knelt in front of the case and stared into it. As I had thought, the sleeping face inside was Sam Hain's, clearly recognizable in spite of the fact that the head had been shaved of its curly white hair and a couple of green plastic tubes had been poked into the nostrils and taped down beside the jaw.

There didn't seem to be any way to open the case, but I didn't need to — I was certain this was the real Sam Hain, maintained, imprisoned, in dim lobotomized half-life in this narrow room. So much for Marc's story of a suicide and refusal to be reborn! Marc and his friends had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure Sam was out of the picture without being freed from his old body.

I was still holding the little gun with which I'd broken the window, and I set it down on the plastic case long enough to whip off my jacket; then I picked it up and wrapped it and my hand tightly in the folds of leather. It was a little two-shot pistol I'd had made in 1900 for use on myself if I should ever want to leave a body quickly — its two bullets were .50 caliber hollow-points, pretty sure to do a thorough job at close range — and I didn't grudge Sam one of them.

I braced my wrist with my free hand and pressed the leather-padded muzzle against the section of plastic over Sam's head. "The cage door's open, Sam," I whispered. "Take off." I squeezed the trigger.

There was jarring thump, but the layers of leather absorbed most of the noise. I untangled the gun and put on the jacket, slapping it to dispell clinging smoke. One glance at the exploded ruin under the holed case was enough to tell me I'd freed Sam, so I tucked the gun back into my jacket pocket and turned to the window.

Getting out wasn't as easy as getting in had been, and I had a gashed finger, a wrenched ankle and a long tear in the left leg of my pants by the time I stood wheezing on the flagstones of the still-empty patio. I combed my hair, straightened my now-perforated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

jacket, and walked around the corner, through the fire-lit mob in the back yard, to the living room.

It was a superficially warm and hearty scene that greeted me as I let the screen door bang shut at my back; yellow lamplight made the smoke-misty air glow around the knot of well-groomed people clustered around the piano, and the smiling white-haired figure with his hand on the pianist's shoulder fairly radiated benign fatherly wisdom. A stranger would have needed second sight to know that several of the company, particularly Amelia, were dangerously drunk, and that perhaps a third of them were currently a physical gender that was at odds with their instinctive one, and that their beaming patriarch was under his plastic skin, a mass of laboring machinery.

Marcus, perched on the arm of the couch, raised his thin eyebrows at my rumpled, dusty appearance, then gave me a little nod and glanced toward the simulacrum. I obediently crossed the room and stood beside the thing.

"Well, Saul!" the machinery said. "It's good to see you, lad. Say, have you thought about what we were discussing earlier in the library?"

"Yes, Sam," I said with as warm smile as I muster, "and I can see it all makes perfect sense. We really do need to establish a position of power, so we can defend ourselves against the ephemerals ... if that should ever become necessary."

I wanted to gag or laugh. I hope, I mentally told the embryo in Marcus, you may some day appreciate what I'm doing right now to buy you a life.

"I'm glad," nodded the simulacrum. "Some truths are hard to face ...: but you never were one to flinch, Saul." It smiles at the company. "Well, siblings, another song or two and then we'll get down to the meeting, hmm? Saul and Marcus and I have a few proposals to air."

Mirabile resumed banging away at the piano, and we went through a couple of refrains each of *Nichevo* and *Ich Bin Von Kopf Bis Fus* as a bottle of Hennesy made the circuit and helped the music to lend the evening an air of pleasantly wistful melancholy. I took a glass of cognac, and winced to see Marc working on still another grasshopper.

"Here, Mirabile," muttered Amelia, edging the pianist off the bench. "I learned to play, last life." After finding a comfortable position, she poised her unsteady hands over the keys, and then set to.

And despite all her hard drinking she played beautifully, wringing real heartbreak out of *The St. James Infirmary*, which we all sang so enthusiastically that we set the glasses to rattling in the cupboard.

We were still singing the last lines when it became clear that Amelia was playing and singing a different song, and our voices faltered away as the new chords moaned out of the piano

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Amelia's lyrics countered ours.

She was handling her man's voice as well as she handled the piano, and some of us didn't immediately realize what song it was that she was rendering.

"...Throw on another log," she sang, "—but draw the curtains shut!
For across the icy fields our yellow light
Spills, and has raised a sobbing in the night.

"Sing louder, friends! Drown out that windy, wavering song
Of childish voices, and step up the beat,
For a rainy pattering, like tiny feet,
Draws nearer every moment. For so very long
They've wandered, wailing in a mournful chorus,
Searching through all of hell and heaven for us."

I don't know whether it was the vapors of the cognac that caused it, or the mood of gentle despair that hung about us like the tobacco smoke, but a couple of voices actually joined her in the nearly whispered refrain:

"And at the close of some unhappy Autumn day,
From their cold, unlighted region,
Treading soft, will come the Legion
Of Lost Children, and
they'll suck our souls
away."

Then a number of things happened simultaneously. Marc's little fist, as he lunged from the couch arm, cracked into Amelia's jaw and sent her and the heavy bench crashing over on the hardwood floor; Mirabile slammed the cover down over the keys, producing one final rumbling chord; the simulacrum just stood and gaped stupidly, and the rest of the company, pale and unmoving, registered varying mixtures of anger, embarrassment and fear.

Marc straightened, shot a look toward the sim, and then glanced furtively at me — snatched his eyes away immediately when mine met them.

"Get her out of here," he rasped to Mirabile. "Don't be gentle."

"To hell with the songs," said the Sam Hain replica expressionlessly. "It's time for the meeting."

I reached into my right jacket pocket. "Just a minute," I said. They all looked up, and I could see a dew of sweat on Marc's forehead — he was wary, even a little scared, and I believed I knew why. "I'll be back in a moment," I finished lamely, and walked into the kitchen.

Just outside the window over the sink was a thermometer, and I cut the screen with a butter knife to reach it. It unsnapped easily from the clamp that held it to the wall, and I pulled the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glass tube off and slipped it into my pants pocket. To explain my next exit I took a can of beer from the refrigerator and tore the tab off as I strolled back into the living room.

"Sorry to hold everybody up," I said. "We rummies need our crutch."

"Sit down, Saul," said Bill quietly. His pipe lay across his bony knees, and his little-girl fingers were busy stuffing it with black tobacco. "Marc went out back to drag everybody in."

I didn't sit down — for one thing, I found myself vaguely disturbed to see discolored teeth and red, wrinkle-bordered eyes in what should have been the face of an eight-year-old girl — but crossed to Marc's place instead. His creamy green drink was still cold, so I fished the thermometer tube from my pocket and, leaning over to hide the action, snapped it in half and shook the glittering drops of mercury into the drink.

Oddly, I felt only a tired depression as I moved away, and not the sorrow I'd have expected — but perhaps the empathy circuits in all of us were fused and blown out centuries ago, and we don't notice it because we so seldom care to call upon those circuits. The knowledge that my child had been killed two months ago, at any rate, grieved me only a little more than would news of the cancellation of some concert I'd been looking forward to.

For I'd figured it out, of course; the pieces were all there, and it had been Marc's involuntary, worried glance, after that song, that put them all together for me. Rafe, Marc's closest friend in the clan, had shot himself two months ago living in an apartment on Lombard Street; and Marc, Amelia had said, was also living in an apartment on that street — the same one, I was certain. Obviously they'd been living together, in accord with Marc's new clan ethics. I wondered with a shudder whether Rafe had been jealous When Marc came down for the street fair.

Probably Marc *had* intended to keep my unborn child as a hostage ... but then Rafe must have got sick or injured or something, and decided to ditch his middle-age body ... and was Marc going to let his old buddy take his chances with whatever fetus randomness might provide, when there was a healthy one so ready to hand?

And so Marc had taken Rafe's hand — and the gun too, I think, judging from the report that Rafe shot himself twice — and held on until the ruined body was quite still and he could be sure his friend's soul was safely lodged in the month-old fetus that had been my child's.

Standing there by the piano that night, I was certain of all this. At my leisure, since, I have occasionally had sick moments of doubt, and have had to fetch the Laphroaig bottle to dull my ears to any "sobbing in the night."

Marc led in those who'd been out back, many of them still gnawing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bones and complaining about being taken from their dinner.

"Shut up now, damn it," Marc told them. "The meeting's going to be a short one this time, you'll be back to your food in ten minutes. Saul and Sam have just got a few ideas to propose."

He nodded to the simulacrum, which stood up, smiled and cleared its throat convincingly. "Siblings," it said, "we all—"

I palmed my little gun and stood up. "Excuse me, Sam," I said, "I'd like to begin, if you don't mind."

"Sit down, Saul," Marc said through clenched teeth.

"No," I said, pointing the gun at him, "you sit down. Don't let your damned drink get warm. I want to open the meeting."

The rest of the clan began showing some interest, hoping for some diverting violence. Marc pursed his lips, then shrugged and sat down, not relishing the idea of losing his current body while it was still so young and usefully good-looking. I smiled inwardly to see him snatch up his glass and down the remainder of his drink at one gulp, and apparently not even notice, under the thick creme de menthe and cream, whatever taste mercury has.

For all I knew, the mercury might just pass through him, as inertly harmless in that form as a wad of bubble gum, but I hoped not — I wanted to throw acid on the wiring of his mind, sand in the clockwork of his psyche, so that, though he might be reborn again and again until the sun goes out, every incarnation would be lived in a different home for the retarded. I hoped — still hope — the mercury could do the job, and with any luck get Rafe too.

"Siblings," I said, "I haven't been around for the last three meetings, but I gather there have been new trends afoot, fostered mainly by him," I jabbed the gun toward Marc, "and *him*," toward the simulacrum. "Quiet, don't interrupt me. For more than a century Sam Hain tried to civilize us, and now these two are eroding his efforts, throwing us back to the cruel, greedy old days of pretending to be gods to the ephemerals ... when actually we're a sort of immortal tapeworm in humanity's guts. What's that, Bill? No, I'm not drunk — sit down, Marc, or I swear I'll blow that beautiful face out through the back of your head — no, I'm not drunk, Bill, why? Oh, you're saying if these two are wrecking Sam Hain's teaching, then who do I think the guy with the white beard is? I'll show you."

I raised my arm and pulled the trigger, and the barrel clouted my cheek as the gun slammed back in recoil. My ears were ringing from the unmuffled report and the cordite smoke had my eyes watering, and I couldn't see the simulacrum at all.

Then I saw it. It was on its hands and knees in the middle of the rug, and all of its head from the nose upward had been taken out as if by a giant ice

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cream scoop. Bits of wire and tubing and color-coded plastic were scattered across the floor, and two little jets of red liquid — artificial blood meant to lend verisimilitude in case of a cut in the cheek — fountained out onto the rug from opposite sides of the head.

The eyes, three-quarters exposed now, clicked rapidly up and down and back and forth in frantic unsynchronized scanning, and the mouth opened: "I'm hurt," the thing quacked, as the automatic damage circuits overrode anything Archie might be trying to do. "I'm hurt. I'm hurt. I'm hurt. I'm—"

I gave it a hard kick in the throat that shattered its voice mechanism and knocked it to the floor. "The real Sam Hain is upstairs," I said quietly, prodding my bruised cheek. "He was being maintained unconscious on a life-support system — and probably would have been forever if I hadn't shot him fifteen minutes ago." Marc stood up. "Give my regards to Rafe when he's born, in six months," I said. After a moment Marc sat down again. I faced the crowd. "Leave the clan," I told them, tossing my gun away. "Take all your money out of DIRE stocks. Stop coming to these horrible meetings and supporting the maniac ravings of people like Marcus and Rafe. Go incognito underground — any of you can afford to live well anywhere, even without your allowances."

No one said anything, so I strode around them to the entry hall and found my helmet. "And when you die this time," I called back as I opened the door, "take the death you've had coming for so long! Let go! The Legion has members enough."

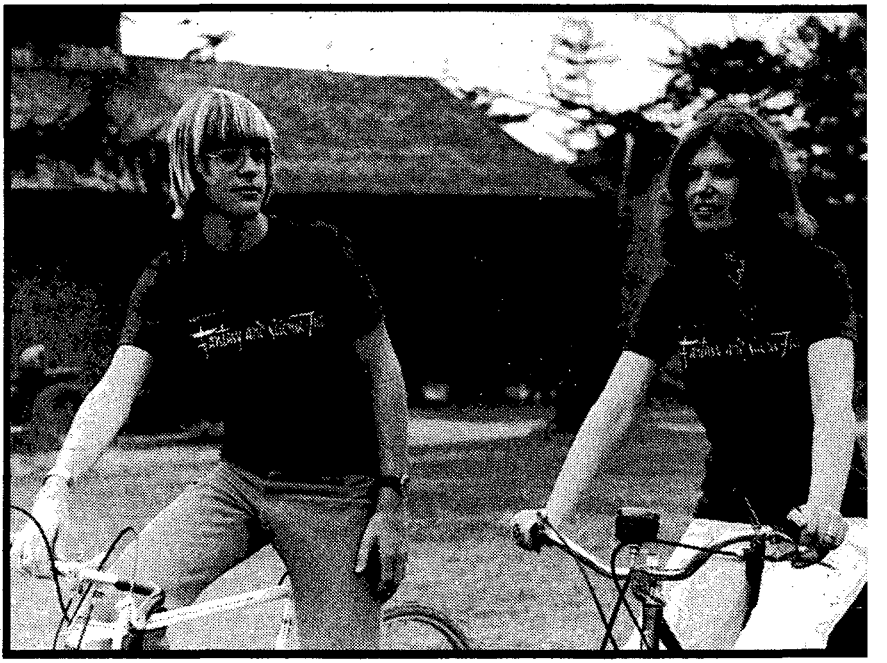
I left the door slightly ajar and trudged down the dark path toward my bike. It started up at the first kick, and the cool night air was so refreshing that I snapped my helmet to the sissy bar and let the wind's fingers brush my hair back as the bike and I coursed down the curling road toward the winking lights of Whittier. The headwind found the bullet holes in my jacket and cooled my damp shirt, and by the time I stopped at the traffic signal on Whittier Boulevard my anger had dissipated like smoke from an open-windowed room.

And so I've decided to let go, this time. It occurs to me that we've all been like children repeating eighth grade over and over again, and finally coming to believe that there's nothing beyond it. And when a century goes by and I haven't shown up, they'll say, What could have made him do it? not realizing the real question is, What stopped preventing him?

The F&SF Competition will appear in the January issue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

F&SF T-Shirts in Two Colors



FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

Send me _____F&SF shirts at $6.50 each, enclosed.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State_____ Zip_____

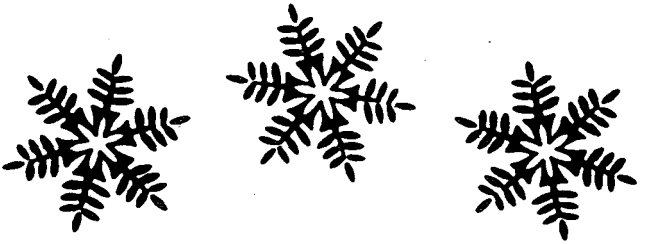
Small ☐ Medium ☐ Large ☐ Extra Large ☐

☐ Red ☐ Navy

Add $1.00 for Canadian and foreign postage.

F&SF T-shirts make a great gift and are available only from this magazine at the bargain price of $6.50 each, which includes postage and handling. These handsome shirts come in navy blue wit the original F&SF logo im-printed in white, or in red with blue imprinting. All siz in stock and shipped as soo as we receive the coupon o a separate order.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



SPECIAL CHRISTMAS RATES

THE MAGAZINE OF **Fantasy & Science Fiction**

$15.00 for the first one-year subscription (your own or gift)

$10.00 for each additional one-year subscription

Send Fantasy and Science Fiction as a Christmas gift:

(PLEASE PRINT)

To _____
Name of Recipient

Street _____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

(PLEASE PRINT)

To _____
Name of Recipient

Street _____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

12-82

☐ I enclose $_____

☐ Bill me after Christmas

Enter my own subscription

☐ New

☐ Renewal

Foreign and Canadian postage: $2.00 per year.

My name_____

Street _____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Mercury Press, Inc.
P.O. Box 56
Cornwall, Ct. 06753

Gift cards will be sent to you, for you to personalize with your own signature.

LICENSED TO SANZOKU
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction
MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. Big 1982 catalog $1.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

PRIVATE COLLECTION for sale. Science fiction, fantasy and horror, hard bound, paper and mags. Write for book list. P. Badalamenti, 1 Crescent Terrace, Bellville, NJ 07109.

BACK ISSUES of Science Fiction and Fantasy magazines are our specialty. Send for free catalog. Overseas requests welcome. Also, highest prices paid for collections, large or small. Ray Bowman, Box 5845F, Toledo, Ohio 43613.

SOFT BOOKS, 89 Marion Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6R 1E6. Buy, Sell, Arkham's, Grant's, etc. Catalogues issued.

SEND 25¢ FOR CATALOG of Scientifantasy books & pulps. Canford, Drawer 216, Freeville, NY 13068.

60,000 SF and Mystery paperbacks, hardcovers, magazines in stock. Free catalogs: Box F-86A, Neche, ND 58265-0133.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY Catalog. O-P 1st Edition Hardcovers and Pulps. les affiches illustrees, 23834 Wendover, Beachwood, OH 44122.

SCIENTIFANTASY SPECIALIST: Books, magazines. 20¢ stamp for catalog. Gerry de la Ree, Cedarwood, Saddle River, NJ 07458.

STRUGGLING WRITER'S NEWSLETTER $6/yr. Box 16315, Greenville, SC 29606.

BOUGHT, SOLD, TRADED, SF&F 1st editions, pulps, digests. Send 2 stamps for 1982 gigantic 15,000 item catalog. Graham Holroyd, 778 Spencerport Rd., Rochester, NY 14606.

SF BOOKS at a discount. Write for free catalog: Luna City Books, Box 19960, Baltimore, MD 21211.

MOONSCAPE, A Magazine of Science Fiction, premiering this fall. Order now! $2.75, 4/$10.00. Moonscape, Box 1858, Swan River, Manitoba R0L 1Z0

SCIENCE FICTION-FANTASY-Mystery. Paperbacks-by-Mail. Send for free catalog. 3000 titles. Edward Mannison, Books-by-Mail, P.O. Box 3236, Seal Beach, CA 90740-2236.

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS — Highest prices paid! Fantasy Archives, 71 Eighth Ave., NYC 10014.

HARDCOVER SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY. Reasonable Prices. Free Lists. Norman Syms, 8 Broadmoor Vale, Upper Weston, Bath, Avon, England BA1 4LP.

FOREIGN EDITIONS OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. Copies of French, German, Spanish, Japanese and Swedish editions available at $2.50 each, three for $7.00. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

USED PAPERBACKS. Science Fiction, Mystery, Collector Books. Free list, state subject. Jet Collectibles, 732 Sixth Ave., Aurora, Ill 60505.

MOONSTONE BOOKCELLARS, INC. 2145 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20037. (202) 659-2600. Science Fiction, Fantasy and Mysteries.

SPECULATIVE FICTION MISCELLANY: Annotated catalog. Write DMK BOOKS, 22946 Brenford, Woodland Hills, CA 91364.

THE LITERATURE OF FANTASY & Science Fiction is remarkably complete at The Science Fiction Shop, 56 Eighth Ave., NY, NY 10014. Worldwide mail-order. Catalogue mailing-list free US/Canada; $1.00 all other. Phone orders welcome. (212) 741-0270.

Do you have something to advertise to sf readers? Books, magazines, typewriters, telescopes, computers, space-drives, or misc. Use the F&SF Market Place at these low, low rates: $7.50 for minimum of ten (10) words, plus 75 cents for each additional word. Frequency discount: 10% for six consecutive insertions, 15% for twelve consecutive insertions. Send copy and remittance to: Adv. Dept., Fantasy and Science Fiction, P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WANTED: SF First Editions. Marietta Corporation, POB 147, Marietta, PA 17547. Phone: (717) 426-1472.

FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS CREATED JESUS, authored Gospels. Positive proof, scholarly booklet: $3.00—Vector, Box 6215-B, Bellevue, WA 98007.

SF PULPS, OLD PAPERBACKS. Latest catalog $1. Book Nook, 223 Harding, Sciotoville, OH 45662.

GENTLY USED PAPERBACKS. SF, Fantasy &Related. 40¢ SASE for list. Egan, 8B, 172 East 4th St.,NYC, NY 10009.

New, used, out of print books. Discounts. FREE CATALOG. Allen Sherman, 49 Fieldstone Road, Staten Island, NY 10314.

F&SF #1 Fall 1949 thru Dec. '57 in binders. '58-'59-'60-'63 complete. '61-'62-'63 10 each. Best offer. Robert LaVanchy, 1420 N. Auburn, Speedway, Ind. 46224.

CLOTHING

F&SF T-SHIRTS. Navy blue with original magazine logo imprinted in white OR: Red shirt **with blue logo. Sm, med, large, extra-large. $6.50 each. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.**

HYPNOTISM

Hypnotism Revealed. Free illustrated details. Powers, 12015SF Sherman Road, North Hollywood, California 91605.

INSTRUCTION

LEARN TO PLAY the classic guitar in only one lifetime. Frederick Draper Guitarist. Student of Segovia (1964, 1966, 1981). Concerts at Carnegie Recital Hall (1976, 1978, 1981). Studios: Manhattan and Westchester. Call 914-241-0572.

SCIENTIFIC ASTROLOGICAL courses. Write Eternal Enterprises, Box 60913V, Sacramento, CA 95860.

MISCELLANEOUS

ESP LABORATORY. This new research service group can help you. For FREE information write: Al G. Manning, ESP Laboratory, 7559 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046.

PYRAMID PUZZLE SOLVED! $2 and large SASE. Kurosaka, 72 Newell, Auburndale, MA 02166.

007 Fan Club. Become James Bond overnight. Get your own James Bond I.D. card, buttons, newsletters, poster info. $4.95 plus $1.00 postage and handling. Celebrity Productions, 5149 S. Cornell, Chicago 60615.

UNICORN or SPACE SHUTTLE LIFTOFF rubberstamp on hardwood mount $5 postpaid. SASE for catalog. Stamping Ground, 616 S. Governor, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

Ideas, inventions, new products wanted! Call 1-800-528-6050. Arizona 1-800-352-0458,X831.

ASTONISHING CONCEPT of powered flight! Secret for 20 years! Renders conventional aircraft obsolete! Brainchild of aeronautical visionary. Pentagon tested. Build working model! Staggering potential! Free details: United States Research Corporation, 5200 North Federal Highway, #2, Science Division FS-12, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33308.

SUPER CHESS — Rules For New Game. Send $2.00, SASE to PO Box 3682, Stanford, CA 94305.

PERSONAL

SINGLE? Meet that special person! Call DATELINE — free: 800-451-3245.

LONELY? Nationwide club for both sexes. Send stamp. Exciting, Box 324, Ontario, Calif. 91761.

EXOTIC ASIA GIRLS — individual introductions. Details, photos $2. Equator, Box 570311-KC, Miami, FLA 33157.

JAPANESE GIRLS make wonderful wives. Let us introduce you to an unspoiled Oriental beauty. $2 brings photos, descriptions, application. Japan International, Box 156-FSF, Carnelian Bay, CA 95711.

PRIVATE ADDRESS. Confidential Services. Professional Mail Forewarding, Box 561-J, Milton, Mass 02186.

RECORDS/TAPES

GREAT SF RADIO PROGRAMS. Free list cassettes. Rare Radio, Dept. F, Box 117, Sunland, Calif. 91040.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

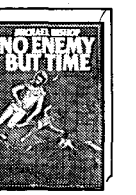
INDEX TO VOLUME 63, JULY-DECEMBER 1982

Aldiss, Brian W.: *Door Slams In Fourth World*.....Oct. 119
Anvil, Christopher: *Superbiometalemon*.....July 37
Appel, Ross: *The Man With The Little Red Wagon (novelet)*.....July 119
Asimov, Isaac: Science
The Three Who Died Too Soon.....July 108
X Stands For Unknown.....Aug. 129
Big Brother.....Sept. 141
Bread And Stone.....Oct. 133
A Difference Of An "E".....Nov. 139
Silicon Life After All.....Dec. 128
Asimov, Isaac: *The Smile That Loses*.....Nov. 69
Ballard, J.G.: *Myths Of The Near Future (novelet)*.....Oct. 50
Blish, James: *The Art Of The Sneeze*..Nov. 62
Broderick, Damien: *Coming Back*.....Dec. 75
Bryant, Edward: *In The Shade*.....Oct. 77
Buckley, Daniel: *Cover for "To Leave A Mark"*.....Nov.
Budrys, Algis: *Books*.....July - Nov.
Cadigan, Pat: *The Day The Martels Got The Cable*.....Dec. 120
Chadwick, Paul: *Cover for "Spider Rose"*.....Aug.
Clute, John: *Books*.....Dec. 46
Collins, Reid: *The Buck*.....July 103
Competition #30: *Report*.....Aug. 159
Conner, Mike: *The Corsican Box (novelet)*.....Dec. 54
Cook, Glen: *Raker (novelet)*.....Aug. 94
Cowper, Richard: *What Did The Deazies Do? (novelet)*.....Dec. 96
Cunningham, P.E.: *Healer (novelet)*..July 44
Davidson, Avram: *Dr. Bhumbo Singh*.....Oct. 41
Ellison, Harlan: *The Hour That Stretches (novelet)*.....144
Florance-Guthridge, George: *Champion Of The World*.....Aug. 49
Foster, Alan Dean: *The Last Run*.....July 95
Garland, Michael: *Cover for "Condemned, A Kiss, And Sleep"*..Dec.
Hardy, David: *Cover for "The Lion In His Attic"*.....July
Cover.....Oct.
Jennings, Gary: *Die And Follow Me*...July 78
Keller, B.L.: *Cold Debt*.....Oct. 105
Kessel, John: *Another Orphan (novelet)*.....Sept. 50
Kilworth, Garry: *Blind Windows (novelet)*.....July 5
Knight, Damon: *Tarcan Of The Hoboes*.....Oct. 27
Kress, Nancy: *A Little Matter Of Timing*.....Sept. 134
Lafferty, R.A.: *Square And Above Board*.....Oct. 94
Letters:.....Sept. 158
McLaughlin, Cooper: *The Shannon Merrow*.....Nov. 77
Malzberg, Barry N.: *Shakespeare MCMLXXXV*.....Nov. 64
Morressy, John: *The Crystal Of Caracodissa*.....Sept. 34
The Hoppy Prince.....Nov. 110
Mueller, Richard: *Everybody Goes To Mosserman's*.....Sept. 120
Niemand, O.: *The Wooing Of Slowboat Sadie*.....Sept. 151
Niven, Larry: *The Lion In His Attic*...July 140
Owens, Barbara: *Happy Birthday, Little Elroy*.....Sept. 42
Payes, Rachel Cosgrove: *Acrostic Puzzle*.....July 159
Perry, Steve: *Champion Of The World*.....Aug. 49
Powers, Tim: *The Way Down The Hill*.....Dec. 139
Pronzini, Bill: *Shakespeare MCMLXXXV*.....Nov. 64
Robinson, Kim Stanley: *To Leave A Mark (novella)*.....Nov. 4
Rucker, Rudy: *The Man Who Ate Himself*.....Dec. 35
Russ, Joanna: *Elf Hill*.....Nov. 150
Sanders, Scott: *The Land Where Songtrees Grow (novelet)*.....Sept. 5
Searles, Baird: *Films*.....July - Dec.
Shaver, Edward F.: *A Choice Of Dreams (novelet)*.....Aug. 140
Shaw, Barclay: *Cover for "The Land Where Songtrees Grow"*.....Sept. 5
Shea, Michael: *The Horror On The #33*.....Aug. 61
Shiner, Lewis: *Brujo*.....Aug. 31
Promises.....Dec. 32
Sterling, Bruce: *Spider Rose*.....Aug. 4
Straley, Rosalind: *Capsule*.....Aug. 48
Sullivan, Thomas: *The Impotentate*...Aug. 80
Tiptree, James Jr.: *The Boy Who Waterskied To Forever (novelet)*....Oct. 4
Tuttle, Lisa: *The Memory Of Wood*...Sept. 89
Weiner, Andrew: *The Letter*.....Nov. 127
Wightman, Wayne: *Condemned, A Kiss And Sleep (novelet)*.....Dec. 7
Willis, Connie: *Mail Order Clone*.....Aug. 122
Service For The Burial Of The Dead.....Nov. 95
Yolen, Jane: *Sule Skerry*.....July 67
The Undine.....Sept. 130
Zahn, Timothy: *The Peaceful Man (novelet)*.....Sept. 100

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

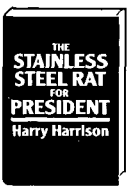
Explore new worlds beyond the limits of time and space.

1651 Spec. ed.



0174 Pub. ed. $17.50

† 0679 Spec. ed.



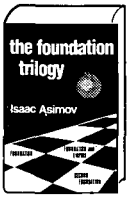
8748 Spec. ed.

5116 Pub. ed. $14.95

0463 Spec. ed.

0927 Pub. ed. $12.95

*6510 Pub. ed. $12.95

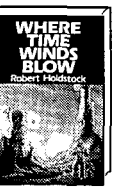


6221 Comb. pub. ed. $23.85

5611 Pub. ed. $13.95

8664 Pub. ed. $16.50

* 0521 Pub. ed. $17.50



*5660 Spec. ed.

6197 The Riddle-Master of Hed; Heir of Sea and Fire; Harpist in the Wind. Comb. pub. ed. $24.85

Take any 5 for $1 WITH MEMBERSHIP.

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

How the Club works:

When your application for membership is accepted, you'll receive your 5 books for only $1 (plus shipping and handling). You may examine them in your home and, if not completely satisfied, return them within 10 days—membership will be cancelled and you'll owe nothing.

About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come*, describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically. If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate, or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need take only 4 Selections or Alternates during the coming year. You may resign any time thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits for as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $3.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions—up to 65% off! A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but do mail the coupon today!

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.
***Explicit scenes and language may be offensive to some.**

† STAR TREK Is A Trademark Of Paramount Pictures Corporation Registered In The U.S. Patent And Trademark Office
Copyright © 1982 By Paramount Pictures Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB

Dept. FR-327, Garden City, N.Y. 11530

I want the best SF in or out of this world! Please accept my application for membership in the Science Fiction Book Club. Send me the 5 books I have numbered in the boxes below, and bill me just $1 (plus shipping and handling). I agree to the Club Plan as described in this ad. I will take 4 more books at regular low Club prices in the coming year and may resign any time thereafter. SFBC offers serious works for mature readers.

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.

Mr.
Ms. _____
(Please print)

Address _____ Apt. # _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

If under 18, parent must sign. _____

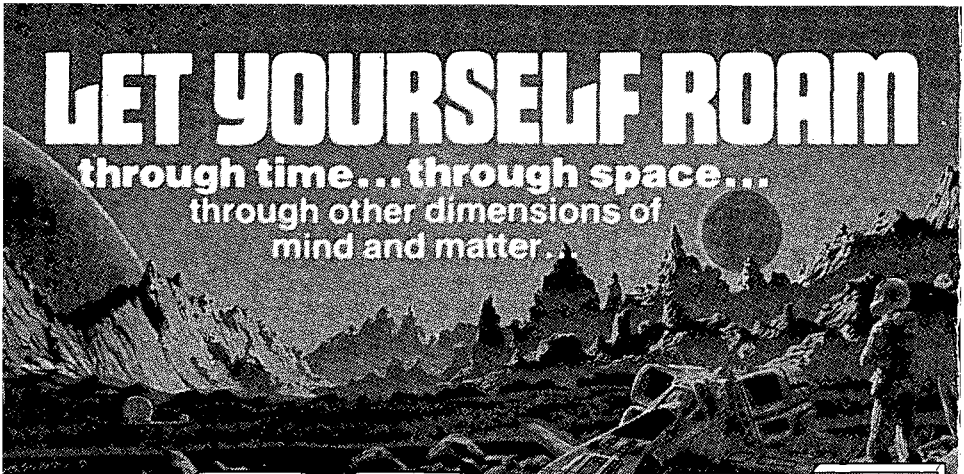
The Science Fiction Book Club offers complete hardbound editions sometimes altered in size to fit special presses and save you even more. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members will be serviced from Canada. Offer slightly different in Canada.

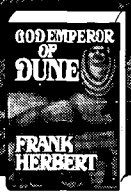
12-S231 D

LICENSED TO MYCOMICS
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

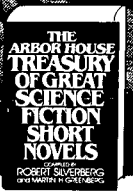
LET YOURSELF ROAM

through time...through space...
through other dimensions of mind and matter...



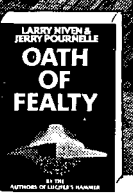


1750 Pub. ed. $12.95



9076 Pub. ed. $19.95

***2840** Comb. pub. ed. $26.90



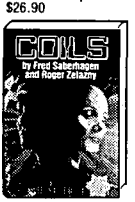
7021 Pub. ed. $13.95

0828 Pub. ed. $14.50

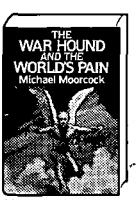
0158 Illustrated. Pub. ed. $11.95

0455 Pub. ed. $19.95

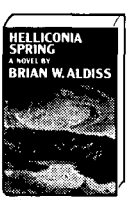
***7955** Pub. ed. $12.95



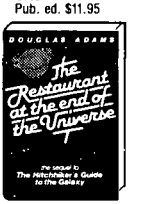
9043 Spec. ed.



8854 Pub. ed. $12.95

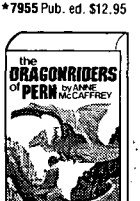


1891 Pub. ed. $15.95

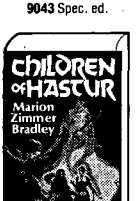


5686 Pub. ed. $7.95

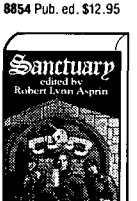
0075 All 5 Amber novels. 2 vols. Comb. pub. ed. $32.30



2543 Dragonflight; Dragonquest; The White Dragon. Comb. pub. ed. $26.85



6833 The Heritage of Hastur; Sharra's Exile. Spec. ed.



0539 Thieves' World; Tales from the Vulgar Unicorn; Shadows of Sanctuary. Spec. ed.

5637 Split Infinity; Blue Adept; Juxtaposition. Pub. ed. $34.40

0497 Nonfiction. Pub. ed. $14.95

TAKE ANY 5 FOR $1
WITH MEMBERSHIP

See other side for coupon and additional Selections.

THE SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB

12-S231 D

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices. *Explicit scenes and language may be offensive to some.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED